

A guide for people with HIV



# Sexually Transmitted Infections



The HIV and sexual health charity for life

**Website:** [www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk) **THT Direct:** 0845 12 21 200

**Registered office:** 52-54 Grays Inn Road, London WC1X 8JU

**Tel:** 020 7831 0330 **Email:** [info@tht.org.uk](mailto:info@tht.org.uk)

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Design **Felton Communication** 020 7405 0900 Ref: 9553 Illustration: Oliver Gaiger

**This booklet is part of a range of publications produced by Terrence Higgins Trust to support you in living well with HIV.**

**Like most of the publications in this range, this one is designed to be suitable for you as a person with HIV, whatever your race, nationality, gender or sexuality. Other publications in this range are for specific groups of HIV positive people.**

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Anyone who has sex is at risk of getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI). If you have one, you can pass it on to other people you have sex with.

Neither of these facts changes because you are HIV positive.

The purpose of this booklet is to give you essential information about sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and support you in dealing with them, so that they don't complicate your sex life.



## I've already got HIV. Why worry about sexually transmitted infections?

Three reasons...

- Whilst the symptoms of some STIs may be minor, others can cause serious health problems. For example, if you leave chlamydia untreated for a long time, it can lead to infertility. Syphilis can damage your heart and brain. You can avoid these problems by having infections treated quickly.
- Your immune system is not as strong as it could be. This means you are more vulnerable to infections. Just as you may want to have any opportunistic infections treated as quickly as possible, you can do the same for sexually transmitted infections.
- You may also want to protect the health of your sexual partners. Firstly, if you have an STI, you could pass that infection on during sex. Secondly, many STIs make your HIV more infectious to others. In other words, you are more likely to pass on HIV, if you are having sex without a condom. For example, there can be an increase in the quantity of HIV in your semen or vaginal fluids, even if there is very little virus in your blood.



## Are they treatable?

Most STIs are treatable. Some very common bacterial infections such as gonorrhoea and chlamydia can be treated by taking antibiotics. These treatments work as well for people with HIV as anyone else.

For some of the viral infections such as herpes and genital warts, you can take treatments to prevent or get rid of the symptoms, but the infection itself cannot be cured.

In some other cases, treatments exist, but may be more complicated if you are HIV positive. For example, the treatment for syphilis may take longer if your immune system is weakened. Similarly, the treatments for hepatitis C can be difficult to take at the same time as anti-HIV medicines.

## How can I avoid picking up a sexually transmitted infection?



The greatest risk of picking up an STI is during unprotected vaginal or anal sex. Condoms or Femidoms, used properly, can greatly reduce the risk of getting STIs. You can also use condoms during oral sex.

However, many STIs can be passed on very easily, and condoms will not protect you from everything. While having sex you might unknowingly touch an infected part of the body, and pick something up.

That's why it's recommended to have regular screening at your clinic for STIs. See below for more information on this.

Vaccinations to prevent infection are available for hepatitis A and B. They are safe for people with HIV, although some HIV positive people need more injections than HIV negative people. No vaccines exist for hepatitis C, or any other STI.

## How can I avoid passing on an infection?

If you know or suspect you have an STI, the surest way to avoid passing it on is not to have sex with anyone until it's been fully treated.

When having sex, many STIs can be passed on simply through close physical contact. To get more detailed information about a specific infection, you can talk to a health adviser at your clinic, or call THT Direct.

Using condoms can greatly reduce the risk of passing on many STIs. Remember that if you are not using a condom, having an STI means that you are more likely to pass on HIV.

## How will I know if I have a sexually transmitted infection?

The signs of having a STI are different from one infection to another. Some symptoms include itching, burning, pain, sores, a change of colour or a discharge in or around the genitals, anus and mouth. If you are experiencing anything like this it is a good idea to have it checked out.

Even if the symptoms disappear after a while, you may still be infected. So you are still advised to go to the clinic and have the problem looked into. Otherwise it could cause you problems in the future.

For many infections, you may not notice any symptoms at all. That's why it's recommended to have regular screening at your clinic for STIs.

## What does 'regular screening' mean?

If you are sexually active, it is recommended to go for 'regular screening'. This means going to the clinic every few months to be tested for different STIs. As the symptoms of STIs are not always easy to spot, having a regular check up is a way of being sure that nothing is wrong.

How often should you go? Some people consider every six months a good figure, but if you have more than a few sexual partners, you might decide to get checked more often. If you ever notice any symptoms, you should go as soon as you can.

Some HIV clinics offer sexual health screens as part of their routine check ups – you can ask if this is the case. There may be a separate sexual health clinic (sometimes called a GUM clinic) in the same hospital. Or you can choose to go to a clinic elsewhere. Treatment at all NHS sexual health clinics is free and confidential.

During your check up, you'll be asked to give a urine sample, so you shouldn't go to the toilet for at least two hours before you go to the clinic. A nurse may take swabs from the tip of the penis or inside the vagina. Depending on the type of sex you have had, they might also take swabs from your mouth, throat or anus. They may also take a blood sample.

## Should I tell clinic staff that I'm HIV positive?

There are good reasons why medical staff need to know your HIV status when treating you for STIs. Some STI treatments can't be used if you are taking anti-HIV drugs, and having HIV can affect the way you respond to treatment. Talking clearly about your situation will often result in you receiving more suitable treatments and advice from medical staff.

One good reason to use your HIV clinic for your sexual health needs is that you won't need to keep explaining to people about being HIV positive.

## Isn't going for regular screening just admitting I sleep around?

The most important thing in all of this is you and your health. For many people, a rewarding sex life is an important part of life, and being HIV positive doesn't alter this.

Staff at sexual health clinics should not judge you. They may ask you about the kind of sex you are having, but that is to be sure that they are giving you the right tests and treatments. The staff in clinics want to deal with STIs as soon as possible, before they start to cause serious problems. That's their job, after all.

## Where can I get more information?

At a sexual health clinic, you can ask to see a health adviser. This is someone who is trained to offer advice and support on sexual health topics.

You could also talk things through by calling THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200. They will also be able to give details of sexual health clinics, and tell you about services provided locally by Terrence Higgins Trust and other organisations.

THT Direct can send you copies of two useful publications which provide more detailed descriptions of the symptoms and treatment of different infections. A booklet published by NAM, *HIV and Sex*, is for all people with HIV. A Terrence Higgins Trust publication, *The Manual* is for gay men, including those with HIV.

For details of local services, information, advice and support, contact us:

[www.tht.org.uk](http://www.tht.org.uk)

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