What are sexually transmissible infections?

Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) are infections that are passed on from person to person usually through body fluids during sexual contact. Sexual contact can include vaginal sex, anal sex, oral sex (mouth-penis/vagina/anus contact), and use of sex toys (such as vibrators).

Another name for STIs is venereal disease - a technical word that also means a disease spread through sexual contact. Other words used for STIs include sexually transmitted infections and sexually transmitted diseases.

In the medical profession, the preferred word is sexually transmissible infections because most infections are short-lived if they are detected early and properly treated. Another reason for using the word infection is because a person can have an infection, pass it on, and not actually show any symptoms of disease.

What are the different types of STIs?

More than 20 different STIs have been identified. Some of the more common STIs include: chlamydia, genital herpes, genital warts, gonorrhoea, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), pubic lice ('crabs'), syphilis, and viral hepatitis A, B, and C.

Each STI belongs to one of four major infection-type groups. These groups are labelled according to the name given to the organism (an individual form of life, such as plant or animal) that causes the infection:

- Chlamydia
- Herpes
- Warts
- Gonorrhoea
- HIV
- Pubic lice
- Syphilis
- Hepatitis

More detailed information about sexual health in Indigenous people can be found at:

http://www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au/sexual_health_review
• bacteria - for example, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis
• virus - for example, genital herpes, genital warts, and HIV
• fungi - for example, candidiasis (thrush)
• parasite - for example, trichomoniasis and pubic lice

How do people get STIs?

STIs are caused by microorganisms - a name given to very small organisms which belong to certain groups, such as bacteria, virus, and fungi. The microorganisms are passed on from one person to another through semen, fluid from the vagina, blood, or saliva, all of which generally occur during sexual activity.

STIs can also be passed on through skin-to-skin contact because some types of microorganisms live on the skin - this is how genital herpes and genital warts are passed on.

The most common way you can contract (catch) an STI is by having sexual contact with an infected person. It is very unlikely for you to get an STI from a non-living object (such as a toilet seat) unless the object has fresh and wet infected body fluid on it.

Less common ways of contracting STIs:
• an infected mother can pass an STI on to her child during birth or breastfeeding
• coming into contact with needles/injecting equipment used by an infected person
• through a blood transfusion containing infected blood

It is possible to have more than one STI at a time. For example, it is common for people who have gonorrhoea to also have chlamydia.

What are the symptoms of STIs?

The symptoms of an STI can vary depending on the type of STI people have. Some common symptoms include:
• unusual discharge from the vagina or penis, such as change in fluid colour or smell
• bleeding from the vagina between periods
• swollen or sore testicles (‘balls’)
• pain or a burning feeling when urinating (peeing)
• sores or lumps in genital area (internal and external reproductive organs)
• pain during sex
• pain in the rectum (bottom/anus)
• discharge from the rectum

It is important to remember that many people who have an STI do not know they are infected. This is a problem for two reasons:
• the infection can mistakenly be passed on to someone else
• the infection can cause serious health problems if left untreated

What health problems can STIs lead to?

Examples of some of the health problems STIs can cause if left untreated:
• pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) (swelling of female reproductive organs)
• infertility (unable to have children)
• ectopic pregnancy (unborn baby develops outside the womb)
• miscarriage (loss of unborn baby, often occurs early in the pregnancy)
• stillbirth (giving birth to a baby that has died)
• constant pelvic pain
• cervicitis (swelling of the cervix, the narrow end of the womb that leads into vagina)
• urethritis (swelling of the urethra, the tube leading from the bladder to outside the body)

How do you know if you have an STI?

The only way you can be certain if you have an STI is by making an appointment with your local doctor, family planning clinic, or sexual health clinic to have a sexual health check. During a sexual health check, the health worker will usually:
• ask questions about your sex life (such as if you use condoms)
• check you for STIs (this may include a physical examination and/or taking swabs for testing)
• give you information about safe sex
• offer you safe sex supplies (such as condoms)

Some people are more at risk of contracting STIs. A sexual health check is highly recommended if you:
• have had unprotected sex (sex without a condom)
• have had many sexual partners
• currently have several sexual partners
• have partners who also have other sexual partners
• are starting a new sexual relationship
• share needles/injecting equipment
How are STIs treated?

Most STIs can be effectively treated if detected early. Some STIs, such as viral STIs, cannot be cured but the symptoms can be managed with medication.

The treatment of STIs involves three steps:

- treatment - taking medicines for the given STI
- counselling - doctor explains the infection and treatment to you and also discusses the importance of letting your sexual partner/s know so they can be tested and treated if needed
- follow-up - when the medication is finished, you have a second test to make sure the STI has been cured

To avoid the spread of STIs, it is important that you avoid having sex until after the follow-up appointment.

The medications used to treat STIs will vary depending on the type of STI:

- bacteria - antibiotics, either single dose or longer course
- virus - no cure available but can use medication to help cope with symptoms
- fungi - topical medication (put on the skin) or antifungal medication
- parasites - antibiotics, topical medication, or medicated shampoo

How can STIs be avoided?

The only way you can truly avoid contracting STIs is through abstinence (stop having sex).

Other ways you can reduce your risk of getting STIs include:

- practise safe sex - always use male and/or female condoms
- minimise number of sexual partners
- be in a long-term relationship with only one person who is not infected
- avoid sharing needles/injecting equipment with other people
- get pre-exposure vaccines - vaccines are available for hepatitis A and B
- avoid sex with people who have sores in their genital area
- have regular sexual health checkups if you have more than one sexual partner and do not use condoms
- if you use sex toys, make sure you use a new condom with each person, wash your hands after removing the condom, and wash the toy after use
The Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet is an innovative Internet resource that contributes to ‘closing the gap’ in health between Indigenous and other Australians by informing practice and policy in Indigenous health.

Two concepts underpin the HealthInfoNet’s work. The first is evidence-informed decision-making, whereby practitioners and policy-makers have access to the best available research and other information. This concept is linked with that of translational research (TR), which involves making research and other information available in a form that has immediate, practical utility. Implementation of these two concepts involves synthesis, exchange and ethical application of knowledge through ongoing interaction with key stakeholders.

The HealthInfoNet’s work in TR at a population-health level, in which it is at the forefront internationally, addresses the knowledge needs of a wide range of potential users, including policy-makers, health service providers, program managers, clinicians, Indigenous health workers, and other health professionals. The HealthInfoNet also provides easy-to-read and summarised material for students and the general community.

The HealthInfoNet encourages and supports information-sharing among practitioners, policy-makers and others working to improve Indigenous health – its free on line yarning places enable people across the country to share information, knowledge and experience. The HealthInfoNet is funded mainly by the Australian Department of Health and Ageing. Its award-winning web resource (www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au) is free and available to everyone.