

## **Sexual Health**

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are diseases passed on through intimate sexual contact. They can be passed on during vaginal, anal and oral sex, as well as through genital contact with an infected partner. Common STIs in the UK include chlamydia, genital warts and gonorrhoea.

### **How common are they?**

In the UK, the incidence of STIs has been rising since the 1990s. The biggest increase was in the number of confirmed diagnoses of genital herpes, which rose by 10% to a total of 28,957 cases. There were also increases in diagnoses of genital warts and chlamydia.

The numbers of diagnosed cases of STIs are still going up and the age group most affected continues to be 16 to 24-year-olds. Even though they make up just 12% of the population, young people account for more than half of all STIs diagnosed in the UK. This includes 65% of new chlamydia cases and 55% of new cases of genital warts.

### **More information on STIs**

The most common STIs are:

- [chlamydia](#)
- [genital warts](#)
- [genital herpes](#)
- [gonorrhoea](#)
- [syphilis](#)
- [HIV](#)
- [trichomoniasis](#)
- [pubic lice](#)
- [scabies](#)
- [balanitis](#)
- [non-specific urethritis](#)

### **Chlamydia**

Chlamydia is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by the bacterium *chlamydia trachomatis*. In the UK, the number of new diagnoses has steadily increased each year since the mid-1990s, and it has now become the most commonly diagnosed STI.

Chlamydia is called the 'silent' disease because most people who get it do not have any noticeable [symptoms](#). Around 50% of men and 70-80% of women who get the chlamydia infection will have no symptoms. Many cases of chlamydia remain undiagnosed.

### **Symptoms**

Chlamydia often goes unnoticed due to the lack of noticeable symptoms. Because of this, many cases of chlamydia remain undiagnosed.

## **Women**

In women, genital chlamydia does not always cause symptoms. Signs and symptoms can appear 1-3 weeks after coming into contact with chlamydia, many months later or not until the infection has spread to other parts of your body.

Some women may notice:

- [cystitis](#) (pain when passing urine)
- a change in their vaginal discharge
- lower abdominal pain
- pain and/or bleeding during sexual intercourse
- bleeding after sex
- bleeding between periods or heavier periods

If left untreated, the chlamydial infection can spread to the womb and cause [Pelvic Inflammatory Disease \(PID\)](#). PID is a major cause of infertility, [ectopic pregnancy](#) and miscarriage.

## **Men**

Symptoms of genital chlamydia are more common in men than in women. Signs and symptoms can appear 1-3 weeks after coming in contact with chlamydia, many months later or not until the infection has spread to other parts of your body.

Some men may notice:

- a white, cloudy or watery discharge from the tip of the penis
- pain when passing urine
- pain in the testicles

Some men have mild symptoms that disappear after two or three days. However, after the discomfort disappears, you may still have the chlamydia infection. This means that you can pass it on to a sexual partner. You are at risk of complications such as inflamed and swollen testicles, [reactive arthritis](#) and infertility.

## **Men and women**

Very rarely, the chlamydia infection may affect areas other than the genitals in both men and women, such as the rectum, eyes or throat.

If the infection is in the rectum it can cause some discomfort and discharge. In the eyes it can cause pain, swelling, irritation and discharge (conjunctivitis). Infection in the throat is very rare and usually causes no symptoms.

## **Outlook**

The chlamydia infection can be easily diagnosed through a simple swab or urine test. Once diagnosed, it can be treated with antibiotics. Undiagnosed chlamydia can lead to more serious long-term health problems and infertility.

Under 25s can get a free, confidential chlamydia test under the [National Chlamydia Screening Programme](#). People over 25 can visit their GP or a local GUM (genitourinary medicine) or sexual health clinic to arrange a test.

## **Genital Warts**

Genital warts are small fleshy growths, bumps or skin changes that appear on or around the genital or anal area. Genital warts are the result of a viral skin infection that is caused by the human papillomavirus (HPV).

Genital warts are usually painless and do not pose a serious threat to a person's health. However, they can appear unsightly and cause psychological distress.

### **The human papillomavirus (HPV)**

The human papillomavirus (HPV) is not a single virus, but a family of over 100 different strains of viruses. Of these, 40 strains of HPV are known to cause genital warts.

Other strains of HPV can cause cervical cancer.

Genital warts can be spread during vaginal or anal sex, and by sharing sex toys. However, you do not need to have penetrative sex to pass the infection on because HPV is spread by skin-to-skin contact. Condoms do not provide complete protection because it is possible for the skin around your genital area (that is not covered by the condom) to become infected.

HPV is most likely to be transmitted to others when warts are present, although it is still possible to pass the virus on before the warts have developed and after they have disappeared.

The incubation period for genital warts (the time that it takes for symptoms to develop after developing an infection) can be as long as one year. Therefore, if you are in a relationship and you get genital warts, it does not necessarily mean that your partner has been having sex with other people.

## **How common are genital warts?**

Genital warts are very common. In England, they are the second most common type of sexually transmitted infection (STI) after chlamydia. Genital warts are most common in sexually active teenagers and young adults. The highest rates of genital warts occur in males who are between 20 to 24 years of age and females who are between 16 and 19 years of age.

## **Outlook**

The outlook for genital warts is good. Several treatments are available, such as creams and cryotherapy (freezing the warts) and they have a good rate of success. However, many treatments can take up to three months before they are fully effective.

## **Genital Herpes**

Genital herpes is caused by the herpes simplex virus (HSV) type 1 or type 2. It causes painful blisters to appear on the genitals and the surrounding areas. As genital herpes can be passed to others through intimate sexual contact, it is often referred to as a [sexually transmitted infection](#) (STI).

HSV can affect any mucous membrane (moist lining), for example those found in the mouth, eyes, anal or vaginal areas. When around the mouth, HSV can cause blister-like lesions called [cold sores](#) to develop.

Genital herpes is a chronic (long-term) condition, with most individuals having recurrences. The average rate of recurrence is four to five times in the first two years after being infected. However, over time, the frequency of attacks decreases and the condition becomes less severe with each subsequent occurrence.

## **The herpes simplex virus (HSV)**

HSV is highly contagious and can be passed easily from one person to another by direct contact. Genital herpes is usually transmitted by having sex (vaginal, anal or oral) with an infected person. Even if someone with genital herpes does not have any symptoms, it is possible for them to pass the condition on to a sexual partner.

Once someone has been exposed to HSV, the virus remains dormant (inactive) most of the time. At least 8 out of 10 people who carry the virus are unaware that they have been infected because there are often few or no initial symptoms. However, certain triggers can activate the virus, causing an outbreak of genital herpes.

## **How common is genital herpes?**

Genital herpes is a common condition, especially between people aged 20-24 years. In 2008 alone, nearly 29,000 people attended a [sexual health clinic](#) in the UK with a first clinical attack of genital herpes.

## **Outlook**

Although there is no cure for genital herpes, the symptoms can usually be effectively controlled using antiviral medicines. The symptoms of genital herpes tend to become less frequent and less severe with each recurring episode of the condition.

## **Gonorrhoea**

Gonorrhoea is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by bacteria called *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* or gonococcus. It used to be known as "the clap".

The bacteria are found mainly in discharge from the penis and vaginal fluid from infected men and women. Gonorrhoea is easily passed between people through:

- unprotected vaginal, oral or anal sex, and
- sharing vibrators or other sex aids, that have not been washed or covered with a new condom each time they are used.

It can also be passed from a pregnant woman to her baby.

Typical symptoms are an unusual discharge from the vagina or penis and pain when urinating.

## **How common is it?**

Gonorrhoea is a less common STI in the UK than chlamydia, genital warts or genital herpes, but over 16,500 new cases of gonorrhoea were reported in 2008.

## **Who is at risk?**

Anyone who is sexually active can contract gonorrhoea, especially people who change partners frequently or do not use a barrier method of contraception, such as a condom, when having sexual intercourse.

Previous successful treatment for gonorrhoea does not make you immune from catching the infection again.

## **Outlook**

Gonorrhoea can be easily diagnosed through a simple swab test and treated with antibiotics. If left untreated, it can lead to more serious long-term health problems and infertility.

## **Syphilis**

Syphilis is a bacterial infection that is usually passed on through having sex with someone who is infected. It can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn child and, in rare cases, can be caught through injecting drugs.

It is extremely rare to catch syphilis through a blood transfusion in the UK as blood donors are carefully screened.

### **Three stages of disease**

Stage 1 (primary syphilis). Symptoms of syphilis begin with a painless but highly infectious sore on the genitals or sometimes around the mouth. If somebody else comes into close contact with the sore, typically during sexual contact, they can also become infected. The sore lasts two to six weeks before disappearing.

Stage 2 (secondary syphilis). Secondary symptoms, such as a skin rash and sore throat, then develop. These symptoms may disappear within a few weeks, after which you experience a latent (hidden) phase with no symptoms, which can last for years. After this, syphilis can progress to its third, most dangerous stage.

Stage 3 (tertiary syphilis). At this stage, it can cause serious damage to the body.

The primary and secondary stages are when you are most infectious to other people. In the latent phase (and usually around two years after becoming infected), syphilis cannot be passed onto others but can still cause symptoms.

### **How common is it?**

The number of diagnoses of syphilis has risen substantially in the past decade in the UK. There have been a number of local outbreaks across England, the largest of which was in London between 2001 and 2004. Rates are highest among men who have sex with men.

### **Outlook**

If diagnosed early, syphilis can be easily treated with antibiotics, usually penicillin injections.

However, if it is not treated, syphilis can progress to a more dangerous form of the disease and cause serious conditions such as stroke, paralysis, blindness or even death.

## **HIV**

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) attacks the body's immune system. A healthy immune system provides a natural defence against disease and infection. If the immune system is damaged by HIV, it increases the risk of developing a serious infection or disease, such as cancer.

HIV infects particular cells, called CD4 cells, that are found in the blood. CD4 cells are responsible for fighting infection. After they become infected, the CD4 cells are destroyed by HIV. Although the body will attempt to produce more CD4 cells, their numbers will eventually decline and the immune system will stop working.

### **How is HIV spread?**

HIV is spread through the exchange of bodily fluids. This most commonly happens during unprotected sexual contact, such as vaginal, oral and anal sex. People who inject illegal drugs and share needles are also at risk of catching HIV. The condition can also be spread from a mother to her unborn child.

There is no cure for HIV and no vaccine to stop you becoming infected. However, since the 1990s, treatments have been developed that enable most people with HIV to stay well and live relatively normal lives.

### **What is a retrovirus?**

HIV is a special type of virus known as a retrovirus. The retrovirus reproduces inside the cell and releases copies of itself into the blood. It can be challenging to treat as the virus can rapidly mutate (alter) into new strains of virus.

### **What is AIDS?**

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a term that is used to describe the late stage of HIV. This is when the immune system has stopped working and the person develops a life-threatening condition, such as pneumonia (infection of the lungs).

The term AIDS was first used by doctors when the exact nature of HIV was not fully understood. However, the term is no longer widely used because it is too general to describe the many different conditions that can affect somebody with HIV. Specialists now prefer to use the terms advanced or late-stage HIV infection.

## **Trichomoniasis**

Trichomoniasis is a common sexually transmitted infection (STI) caused by a tiny parasite called *Trichomonas vaginalis*

Trichomoniasis can be difficult to diagnose because there may not be any symptoms, and when there are symptoms, they can be similar to those of other conditions and STIs.

### **Symptoms in women**

Trichomoniasis affects the vagina and urethra (tube through which urine passes), causing any of the following symptoms:

- Soreness, inflammation (swelling) and itching around the vagina. Sometimes your inner thighs also become itchy.
- A change in vaginal discharge. Your discharge may appear thicker, thinner, frothy or yellow or green in colour. You may also produce more discharge than normal and it may have an unpleasant, fishy smell.
- Pain or discomfort when passing urine.
- Discomfort during sexual intercourse.
- Pain in your lower abdomen (tummy).

### **Symptoms in men**

Trichomoniasis affects the urethra (tube through which urine passes) and occasionally the prostate gland (a gland at the neck of the bladder that helps produce semen), causing any of the following symptoms:

- pain after urination and ejaculation
- thin white discharge from the penis
- discomfort during sexual intercourse

Rarely, a man may also have an inflamed (red and swollen) foreskin.

### **How it is caught**

Trichomoniasis is usually spread through unprotected sexual intercourse (without using a condom). You do not have to have many sexual partners to catch trichomoniasis. Anyone who is sexually active can catch it and pass it on.

### **Outlook**

Trichomoniasis is unlikely to go away without treatment. Most men and women are treated with an antibiotic called metronidazole, which is very effective. Trichomoniasis rarely causes complications.

### **Pubic Lice**

Pubic lice (phthirus pubis), also known as crabs, are tiny blood-sucking insects. They live in coarse human body hair, most commonly pubic hair, and cause itching and red spots.



The lice can also be found in:

- the eyelashes or eyebrows,
- hair on the abdomen or back, and
- facial hair, such as beards or moustaches.

Adult pubic lice are about 2mm long and are grey-brown in colour.

Pubic lice are caught through close contact with someone who has them. The most common way is during sexual contact. There is not enough evidence to say whether pubic lice can be transferred through items such as bedding or towels, although some experts think that it might be possible.

## **Outlook**

The outlook is generally good. Pubic lice can usually be successfully treated with insecticide medicines available over-the-counter (OTC) in most pharmacies, or from a GP or GUM clinic. If pubic lice were caught through sexual contact, any current sexual partners and partners from the previous three months may need to be informed and treated.

## **Non Specific Urethritis**

Urethritis is inflammation of the urethra. The urethra is the tube that carries urine from the bladder out of the body.

Urethritis is usually caused by infection, although this is not always the case. The term non-specific urethritis (NSU) is used when the cause of the urethritis has not yet been identified.

NSU can have a number of possible causes, but it is estimated that the STI chlamydia is responsible for nearly half of all male cases.

## **How common is non-specific urethritis?**

Urethritis is one of the most common reasons for men to visit their local genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinic or [sexual health clinic](#). There are around 80,000 cases of urethritis diagnosed in men visiting GUM clinics every year. It is more difficult to diagnose urethritis in women because it may not cause as many symptoms.

## **Outlook**

NSU is usually treated with antibiotics (medicines to treat bacterial infections) and the symptoms usually go away within two weeks. It is important that past and current sexual partners are also treated to prevent any infection spreading to other people. Women often

have no symptoms of NSU, but if it is caused by chlamydia it can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) if it is not treated. Repeated episodes of PID are associated with an increased risk of infertility.