

HIV & STI information for Gay & Bisexual Men

If you're a gay or bisexual man, using condoms and having regular sexual health checks can help you maintain a healthy sex life and reduce your risk of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). On these pages we give you lots of information and advice about HIV and other STIs as well as information on other sexual health issues to help you make your sex life safer, healthier and happier.

HIV and AIDS

HIV (Human Immuno-deficiency Virus) is still an on-going serious threat to the health and well-being of gay and bisexual men as new diagnoses of HIV infection that happen in the UK continue to disproportionately affect the gay community. Recent advances in treatment and support, however, mean that HIV is now regarded as a lifelong chronic illness rather than the 'death sentence' it was seen as when HIV was first discovered in the 1980s. The important thing here is an early diagnosis of HIV infection so that someone can be monitored and the correct treatment given at the appropriate time.

HIV stands for **Human Immuno-deficiency Virus**. It is a viral infection that can be transmitted sexually. In fact, of the 40 million people infected with HIV in the world the vast majority were infected from having sexual intercourse with another person with the virus.

Once the HIV virus enters the body it attaches onto cells in our immune system that help protect us and keep us healthy. It eventually kills off these cells weakening the immune system so that it is unable to fight off infections and other illnesses.

A person who has been infected with HIV and has the virus is said to be HIV positive. Someone who has been tested for HIV and does not have the virus is HIV negative. Most people, however, are HIV status unknown – that is they have not been tested so cannot say with certainty what their HIV status is.

Once the immune system is weakened by HIV, illnesses that would otherwise be easily fought off can take hold and affect us (these are called opportunistic infections). These include rare kinds of cancers, pneumonia and brain diseases amongst many others. If someone who has the HIV virus develops some of these rare illnesses then they are said to have AIDS. AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**. **HIV and AIDS are not the same thing.**

A person who is HIV positive can live for many years before being affected by the illnesses that might give them an AIDS diagnosis. In England and Wales there are very effective treatments that work for many people. They help to keep the amount of HIV in someone's body at a manageable level and help the immune system stay stronger for longer. These drug treatments do have side effects that can be difficult to live with and the treatments need to be taken regularly and at certain times of the day in order to be effective. If treatment is suspended or interrupted, someone may develop a drug resistant form of HIV.

Recent developments in treatment of HIV include Post Exposure Prophylactic treatment (PEP). If someone has been at risk of being infected with HIV (e.g. by having unprotected sex with someone who is HIV) they can take a one month course of HIV drug treatments that start within 72 hours of possible exposure to the virus, which can stop HIV taking hold in the body and prevent HIV infection.

However, the outlook has never been better for HIV positive people in the UK. Life expectancy for people with HIV who start treatment before there is too much damage to the immune system is now similar to that of people who do not have the virus. This is not the case in some parts of the world where access to treatment is limited or non-existent and where people are still dying of an AIDS related illness every day.

Transmission of HIV

When a person is infected with HIV, the virus can be found in many of their bodily fluids. However, in fluids like **saliva**, **sweat** and **urine** the levels of virus are so low and the quality of virus so poor that there is **absolutely no chance** of being infected with HIV by coming into contact with them.

The only bodily fluids where the level and quality of HIV is **high enough** to be infectious are:

- **Blood**
- **Semen**
- **Vaginal Fluids**
- **Anal Mucus**
- **Breast Milk**

Coming into contact with these bodily fluids is not in itself a risk in terms of infection. There has to be route of transmission for these fluids to get into our blood stream.

Many of the high-risk activities in terms of possibly becoming infected with HIV are sexual activities. Particularly high-risk activities are vaginal penetrative sex and penetrative anal sex – where the penis enters the vagina or rectum. This applies to both men and women, gay or straight and whether you are the person being penetrated or the person penetrating (the giver or receiver). Oral sex carries some risk of infection but this is much lower than penetrative sex. The factor that could increase the risk of infection from oral sex is the general state of the mouth and throat. If there is damage from bleeding gums, mouth ulcers or from a bacterial STI (e.g. gonorrhoea) than the risk is increased. Oral sex performed on a man (fellatio) is higher risk than oral sex performed on a woman (cunnilingus).

The best way to protect ourselves from becoming infected with HIV is to use condoms and water based lube when having penetrative sex and not share needles and injecting equipment with others. It is also advisable to use flavoured condoms for oral sex and dental dams when rimming – this also provides protection from lots of other Sexually Transmitted Infections. Avoid sharing sex toys – or wash them before someone else uses them – or use a new condom on dildos for each person.

If you have any worries or concerns about HIV and AIDS, contact your local sexual health service.

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)

Gonorrhoea, Syphilis, Warts and Crabs – these and many other infections can all be passed on sexually. At best, they can cause discomfort, embarrassment and irritation. If left undetected or untreated, however, they can have long-term damaging effects on our health but there is good news – many of these infections can be treated, cured or managed effectively if diagnosed early enough.

STIs are infections that can be passed from one person to another person during sexual activity. There are over 30 different infections that can be passed on sexually. Some of these really can only be passed on during sex, some can be passed on in other ways and some develop in our own bodies and then can be passed on sexually. Basically, sex involves getting close and intimate with other people and this is what allows the infections to spread.

STIs can be passed on through any type of sex including anal sex, oral sex, rimming and mutual masturbation/fingering.

At best, STIs can cause discomfort, embarrassment and irritation. They can, however, have long-term effects on our health including infertility (unable to have children), impotence (unable to have an erection), life-long illness or even death. **Some STIs that can cause long-term damage have no symptoms at all.**

STIs roughly fall into one of three categories – **bacterial** infections, **parasitic** infections and **viral** infections.

Bacterial Infections

Bacteria are very small single-celled life forms that live in and around us and can reproduce quickly. While not all bacteria are harmful (in fact our bodies need some forms of good bacteria) some cause disease and illness. In order to survive and develop, most bacteria use organic matter as food and warmth. Therefore, if we think about the warm, moist parts of our bodies (the end of the penis, the rectum and the throat) they are the ideal places for bacteria to thrive and grow.

Parasitic Infections

A parasite is an animal or plant that lives in or on a host (another animal or plant). They obtain nourishment from the host without benefiting or killing the host.

Parasitic infections that can be passed sexually can also be passed on in other ways, but getting close and intimate with someone who has one of these infections is an ideal way for a parasite to move from one person to another.

Viral Infections

A virus is an infectious agent that invades and takes over cells within our bodies and cause disease and illness. There are many forms of viral infections that can be passed from one person to another – measles, mumps, influenza, chickenpox etc.

Some viral infections are classed as STIs because this is the way they are mainly contracted.

Using condoms and water based lube when having anal sex can help prevent the transmission of many STIs. It is also advisable to use flavoured condoms for oral sex and dental dams when rimming – this also provides protection from lots of other Sexually Transmitted Infections. Also, when sharing sex toys (dildos/butt pugs/vibrators – wash them before someone else uses them – or use a new condom on them for each person.

If you have any worries or concerns about Sexually Transmitted Infections, contact your local sexual health service.