

# Sexual Health Information for Gay & Bisexual Men

When we talk about sexual health, we often focus on HIV and other STIs, but there are a number of other illness and issues that can affect men's sexual health. These can include erectile dysfunction (finding it difficult to get or keep an erection), testicular problems, anal pain and discomfort and other infections affecting the genital or anal area.

## Balanitis

Balanitis is a condition where the end of the penis (or the glans) becomes inflamed, leading to redness, irritation and soreness. Men who experience this can sometimes mistake this for symptoms of an STI. Possible causes of balanitis are:

- a build up of yeast infection, urine, sweat or other debris under the foreskin
- an allergic reaction to some soaps, washing powders or cleansing products
- an allergic reaction to condoms
- phimosis – a condition where the foreskin is tight and does not pull back over the glans
- another sexually transmitted infection

Treatments depend on the cause of balanitis, but could include:

- an anti-yeast cream or tablets (e.g. canesten)
- a steroid cream to reduce inflammation
- advising the use of non-latex condoms
- circumcision (if the man has phimosis)
- regular washing of the glans with water and a bland soap
- treatments for any STIs present

## Testicular Cancer

This is the most common form of cancer affecting young men between the ages of 15 and 40. Men with an undescended or partially descended testicle (one or both testicles don't come down into the scrotum) are more likely to develop testicular cancer as do men with a family history of this cancer. Symptoms usually consist of a lump, growth or ongoing pain in the testicles. Men could also notice blood when they urinate.

## Torsion of the Testes

Torsion of the testes is a condition where the testes (or testicles) twist around in the scrotum and the spermatic cord also twists blocking the blood supply into the testicle. This is a very painful condition and if the testicle is not untwisted and the blood supply restored within 6 hours of torsion happening, the testicles will become damaged and may 'die'. This condition should, therefore, be treated as a medical emergency and requires an operation to untwist the testes. If this operation is too late, the testicle will have to be removed.

Whilst this condition is uncommon in men over the age of 25, it can occur at any age.

## Prostate Cancer

The prostate gland is only found in men and helps to make seminal fluid. It lies just below the bladder and is about the size of a chestnut. The prostate gland can be felt through the walls of the rectum and when stimulated this way (through anal sex, fingering or the use of a dildo or vibrator) can produce intense sexual pleasure for some men.

Prostate Cancer occurs when malignant cancer cells form within the prostate. These cancerous cells can develop and spread to other areas of the body. Although most cases of Prostate Cancer develop in men over the age of 65, it can affect younger men.

Symptoms may include:

- A poor or weak urine stream – it takes longer to empty your bladder
- Dribbling of urine from the penis after urinating
- Needing to go to the toilet more urgently
- A more frequent need to urinate
- Pain at the base of the penis
- An early diagnosis of Prostate Cancer is a major key to successful treatment. This can be done by examining the prostate gland (the doctor will insert a finger into the rectum and feel the gland for lumps or enlargement) and by a blood test.

Treatment for Prostate Cancer depends on the size of the cancer and whether it has spread or not. It can range from treatment to control the cancer or to ease the symptoms. The prostate might be removed or hormones given to slow down the growth of the cancer both of which could cause erectile dysfunction (impotence) and a man might need medication or other support in order to get and maintain an erection.

## **Bacterial Prostatitis**

This infection of the prostate is caused by a bacterial infection. Usually the cause is bacteria that lives in the bowel being transferred to and travelling up the urethra and irritating the prostate. Other causes could be a side effect of having kidney stones or after having a catheter fitted. Sexually transmitted infections are rarely the cause of prostatitis.

Men can have an acute infection (which happens suddenly) or a chronic infection that occurs gradually over time. Symptoms can be a sharp pain at the base of the penis or in the testicles, pain when going to the toilet, pain when ejaculating and general aches, pains and fever.

A urine test can normally detect the presence of bacteria that may be causing the prostatitis, but an x-ray might be required to check for other problems with the urinary tract. If this condition is confirmed, a 4-week course of antibiotics is needed plus painkillers to ease any pain and fever. Laxatives can also help by making faeces softer and taking pressure off the prostate when going to the toilet.

## **Anal Fissure**

This is a small tear of the skin of the anus that can be caused by constipation or through anal sex. This can be very painful and the pain can feel worse after going to the toilet when you pass faeces or after anal sex – often followed by bleeding from the anus. In most cases, fissures heal themselves after time, but some people will need cream, ointments and painkillers to help with healing. Avoiding anal sex until the fissure heals is also recommended.

## **Sexual Dysfunction**

Sex can sometimes be difficult for men for a number of reasons. This could be problems getting and maintaining an erection, ejaculating too soon or not at all, loss of interest in sex or obsessive/compulsive sexual thoughts.

Lots of things can contribute to sexual dysfunction including stress, anxiety, the effects of alcohol or recreational drugs and traumatic life experiences. Some men may need psychosexual counselling in order to resolve their difficulties in having sex. Others may need medical intervention – prescribing viagra, implants to achieve an erection etc.

## **Oral Sex**

Lots of gay and bisexual men are into oral sex (sometimes referred to as 'blow jobs' or 'going down'). Whilst oral sex is considered low-risk in terms of HIV infection, there is potentially some risk of HIV being passed on and oral sex can also be a very high-risk activity in transmission of other sexually transmitted infections including gonorrhoea, chlamydia, syphilis and herpes.

## Oral Sex and HIV

Oral sex is fairly low risk in terms of becoming infected with HIV, but we don't really know how low a risk it really is – partly because men who have oral sex with other men will often also have anal sex as well. And we know that anal sex without a condom is a very high-risk activity.

However, some men have said that the only way they could have become infected with HIV is from giving oral sex (a blow job) to another guy. We also know that oral sex is the most frequent sexual act between men – more men have oral sex than anal sex – so it is significant that so few cases of HIV are believed to be as a result of oral sex.

Oral sex cannot, therefore, be classed as a safe sex, but there are a number of things you can do to make it safer.

If you are giving oral sex to another man:

- Use a flavoured condom
- If you don't use a condom, don't get cum in your mouth
- Don't brush your teeth before giving oral sex – this can cause your gums to bleed and increase the risk of infection
- Look after your teeth and gums – people with gum disease and ulcers may be more likely to be infected with HIV through oral sex
- Think about having a regular sexual health check up to check for and treat any STIs that may be present in your mouth – having an STI in the throat can increase the chances of HIV infection from giving oral sex

## Oral Sex and Other STIs

While oral sex is relatively low risk in terms of HIV infection, it is a high-risk activity for other Sexually Transmitted Infections.

- You can pass on bacterial infections such as Gonorrhoea, Chlamydia and Syphilis through oral sex – both giving and receiving blow jobs. The herpes virus can also be passed from mouth to genitals during oral sex.
- Having an STI in your throat could also make you more vulnerable to HIV infection
- Rimming (oral/ anal sex) can also help to transfer these bacterial STIs, Hepatitis and other gut infections between men.

**Using condoms for oral sex and dental dams for rimming can significantly reduce the chances of getting an STI from oral sex.**

## Making Sex Safer

If used correctly and consistently, condoms and dental dams are an effective barrier to most sexually transmitted infections including HIV. Knowing that you are looking after your body by protecting you and your partner (or partners) from these infections can take away some of the worries about sex so that you can relax and enjoy it more!

STIs are extremely common infections – many of us will come into contact with at least one of these at some part in our lives. They are also extremely easy to pass on from one person to another through all types of sexual activity. But there are a number of things we can do to reduce the risk of being infected with STIs.

- Use condoms and water based lube for anal sex and flavoured condoms for oral sex/ (blow jobs).
- Use dental dams (a flavoured latex barrier) for rimming (anal/oral sex).
- Have a regular sexual health check-up at a sexual health clinic (GU Clinic). This could be every year, every 6 months or every 3 months dependent on our sexual activity and the number of sexual partners we have.
- Seek prompt medical attention for any symptoms of STIs
- Refrain from sexual activity while undergoing any treatment for an STI
- Regularly check our genitals for signs of infection

## Condoms and Dental Dams

### Condoms

If used correctly and consistently, condoms are an effective barrier to most STIs. Yet there are still a lot of reasons that people give for not wanting to use them. However, knowing you and your partner are less likely to get an STI can help give you peace of mind. Condoms can be fun to use if part of the whole sexual experience. There are many different condoms available that have different textures, are thinner, non-latex, flavoured and even one that includes a local anaesthetic to help men delay ejaculation. It can be enjoyable finding out which one you prefer using.

### Dental Dams

Dental dams are sheets of flavoured latex that can be used as a barrier to prevent infections from anal oral (rimming) sex.

They are placed over the entire anal area and held in place whilst oral sex takes place. Like condoms, dental dams should be thrown in the bin after use and only used once.