

# A GUIDE TO SEXUAL HEALTH

Gain the knowledge and tools to reduce the risk of sexually transmitted infections (STI's) and unintended pregnancy.

## CONSENT AND COMMUNICATION

Make sure everyone involved is totally into it- and stays that way. Consent isn't a one-time thing; it's ongoing and should be enthusiastic. Anyone can change their mind at any point, and that's totally okay. Just because someone is okay with one thing doesn't mean they're down for everything. Consent always needs to be a clear yes, not a maybe, and definitely not a no. And remember, if someone says "no" that's not an invitation to try and change their mind- it means stop.

## WAYS TO GET CONSENT:

- Can I touch your (body part here)?
- Do you want me to keep going?
- I'd like to \_\_\_\_\_, would you like that?
- Would you like to have sex?
- Would you like to make out?
- Ways to check in on partner:
  - Can I keep going? Does this feel good to you? Would you like me to stop?
- Would you like to try something different?

# TALKING WITH YOUR PARTNER

Effective partner communication is a key part of maintaining sexual health. Talking openly with your partner about desires, boundaries, and expectations before becoming sexually active helps ensure that everyone feels respected.

These conversations should include discussions about safer sex practices, such as using condoms, getting tested for STIs, and choosing birth control methods, so everyone is on the same page about protection and consent.

Check out the Do's and Don't s for promoting sexual health



## ABOUT STIS & PROTECTION

Safer sex means taking steps to protect yourself and your partners from sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and unintended pregnancy. STIs can be transmitted through vaginal, anal, or oral sex, as well as through skin-to-skin contact.

If you're not sure about your STIs status, **the most reliable way to find out is to get tested.** You can access **STI TESTING** at most local health centers, your healthcare provider office, and many university health centers.

# BARRIER METHODS



Using Barrier methods - such as condoms, internal condoms, dental dams, or finger condoms- every time you have sex or engage in any sexual activity where bodily fluids are exchanged is one of the most effective and straightforward ways to make sex safer.

These barriers physically prevent contact with fluids like semen, pre-ejaculatory fluid, vaginal fluids, and blood, all of which can transmit sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

Consistent and correct use of these methods significantly reduce the risk of STI transmission.



## INTERNAL CONDOM

### Body Placement: Rectum or Vagina

Cover the inside of vagina or anus, preventing fluid transfer.



## CONDOM

### Body Placement: Erect Penis

Cover the penis during intercourse to prevent fluid transfer that can carry infections.



## DENTAL DAM

### Body Placement: Over the Anus or the Vulva

For oral sex, prevent skin-to-skin contact between your mouth and vulva or anus, and prevent fluid transfer.

## COMMON TYPES OF SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTION (STI)

### Chlamydia

A common bacterial infection and sexually transmitted infection (STI). It can affect the cervix, urethra, testicles, fallopian tubes, or ovaries. When transmitted through oral sex, it can also infect the throat. Chlamydia requires medical treatment and should not be left untreated.

### Gonorrhea

A bacterial infection or sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can affect the cervix, uterus, fallopian tubes, urethra, mouth, throat, or anus. Medical treatment is necessary for proper care.

### Syphilis

A bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI) spread through direct contact with a syphilis sore, which can appear on the mouth, genitals (penis or vagina), anus, or skin. Medical treatment is essential.

### Herpes

A viral infection caused by HSV-1 or HSV-2, spread through sexual or intimate contact, even between outbreaks. HSV-1 often causes cold sores. There's no cure, but treatments can help reduce symptoms and outbreaks.

### HPV

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a highly common sexually transmitted infection, with over 40 different types that can affect the genital area. Some strains of HPV are linked to certain cancers, while others can cause genital warts. Vaccines are available to protect against several of the most harmful HPV types, and individuals diagnosed with HPV may require medical treatment depending on the strain.

### Hepatitis

A chronic infectious liver disease that comes in several forms, with hepatitis A, B, and C being the most common. All three can be transmitted through sexual contact and require medical attention. Vaccines are available to prevent hepatitis A and B, but not hepatitis C.

### HIV

A virus that weakens the immune system and can lead to AIDS if untreated. With early and effective treatment, individuals can live long, healthy lives and reduce the virus to undetectable levels, preventing transmission to others.

### Trichomoniasis

One of the most common sexually transmitted infections, caused by a microscopic parasite that typically infects the vagina, urethra, or bladder. It requires medical treatment for effective management.

## HERE'S A BREAKDOWN ON HOW STIS ARE COMMONLY PASSED

| STI                 | Skin-to-Skin Contact | Bodily Fluids |
|---------------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Gonorrhea           |                      | ✓             |
| Chlamydia           |                      | ✓             |
| Syphilis            | ✓                    |               |
| Herpes              | ✓                    | ✓             |
| HPV                 | ✓                    |               |
| HIV                 |                      | ✓             |
| Hepatitis A, B, & C |                      | ✓             |
| Trichomoniasis      | ✓                    | ✓             |

## Stay up to date with Medications & Vaccines

Some STIs are also preventable through vaccines or medications like Pre-exposure prophylaxis

PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a medication that people who are HIV-negative can take to help reduce their risk of getting HIV from sex or injection drug use. When taken as prescribed, PrEP lowers the risk of getting HIV from sex about by 99% percent and from injection drug.

PrEP works by blocking HIV's ability to make copies of itself, so the virus can't take hold in your body if exposed. In order for it to work, PrEP must be taken before being exposed to HIV, otherwise it won't work. In which case PeP would be recommended.

If you think PrEP might be a good fit, make an appointment with a health care provider to talk about your options and get started.

Resources [hivinfo.nih.gov](https://hivinfo.nih.gov)

# FACTS ABOUT HIV



## **HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus.**

How is HIV transmitted: HIV can be spread through unsafe sex, needle sharing, blood transfusion, and pregnancy/childbirth/breastfeeding. That is because HIV is carried in semen, vaginal fluids, anal fluids, blood, and breastmilk.

## **Ways someone cannot get HIV:**

- Hugging, kissing, holding hands, shaking hands, or living with someone who is HIV+.
- Contact with objects such as toilet seats, doorknobs, telephones, etc.
- Mosquitos, ticks, or other insects — HIV is not spread by insect bites.
- Saliva, sweat, tears, feces, or urine do not pass HIV.

## **Who is at risk of HIV?**

Anyone can get HIV regardless of sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or geographic location.

## **What behaviors can put someone at high risk for HIV?**

- Unprotected anal sex without a condom.
- Unprotected vaginal sex without a condom.
- Having multiple sexual partners.
- Using drugs, sharing needles, or using syringes to inject drugs.
- Using drugs and alcohol can affect your judgment and increase the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, such as having sex without a condom or with multiple partners.

## **Ways to avoid HIV:**

- Use condoms and dental dams each time you have sex.
- Do not share needles.
- Take medications like PrEP if you are at higher risk.
- Limit your number of sexual partners.
- Get tested and treated for other STIs.
- Consider PEP if you think you have been exposed to HIV.



## **How can I get tested?**

Getting tested for STIs and HIV is important when you are sexually active. The only way to know your HIV status is by getting tested. You can request an HIV test with your healthcare provider or community health clinic.

## **Types of tests:**

- Rapid HIV test (results within 20 minutes).
- Oral swab.
- Blood draw (blood is drawn from the arm, then taken to a lab).
- At-home HIV tests

## **For people living with HIV:**

Taking HIV medicine as prescribed (antiretroviral therapy, or ART) and achieving an undetectable viral load means you cannot transmit HIV to your sexual partners.



## PrEP (Pre-exposure prophylaxis)

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) involves taking prescription medication regularly before you're exposed to HIV to help prevent infection. However, PrEP does not protect against other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), so it's still important to use condoms.

## PeP (Post-exposure prophylaxis)

PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) is a short course of prescription medication taken daily after a possible exposure to HIV, designed to prevent infection. PEP must be started within 72 hours (3 days) of exposure—the sooner, the better—and is most effective when begun as soon as possible.

The treatment involves taking HIV medicines every day for 28 days. PEP is intended for emergency situations, such as when a condom breaks during sex and you're unsure of your partner's HIV status, when you have unprotected sex with someone living with HIV who is not virally suppressed, or when you come into contact with a needle that may be contaminated.

PEP is not meant for ongoing prevention and should not replace regular HIV prevention methods like condoms or PrEP.

## Vaccines are available for certain STI'S

- HPV Vaccine
- Hepatitis A Vaccine
- Hepatitis B Vaccine



# THE HUB

# ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS TO ASK YOUR DOCTOR DURING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH APPOINTMENTS

When visiting your healthcare provider for sexual and reproductive health, having a list of key questions can help you get the most out of your appointment and maintain your well-being. A doctor visit should not have to feel scary or intimidating—after all, they are there to help! Here are important questions to consider during your visits:

## **Menstrual Health**

- Can we talk about what's typical or healthy when it comes to my period (timing, flow, symptoms, mood)?
- How can I tell if there's something unusual about my cycle?
- What are some options for managing discomfort, heavy flow, or other period symptoms?
- How often should I schedule exams like Pap smears, breast exams, or pelvic exams?

## **Sexual and Reproductive Health**

- Can you give me information on HPV and the vaccine?
- Is the HPV vaccine something I should consider?
- What vaccines or medications are available to reduce the risks of STI's?
- What STI's should I be tested for, and how often should I get tested?

## **Birth Control and Contraception**

- What birth control options are available, and how do they work?
- What methods of contraception help protect against STI's?
- Which methods might fit my health needs, lifestyle, and preferences?
- What are some non-hormonal birth control options?
- Can you explain the effectiveness, side effects of the different methods?
- How do I start or stop a birth control method effectively?
- What should I do if I have trouble remembering to take birth control or use it as directed?
- Are there long-acting or low maintenance options of bc?
- Can birth control help with other concerns, like regulating periods, acne, or cramps?
- Do any methods help prevent STI's in addition to pregnancy?
- What should I know about emergency contraception? when and how to use it?



## Essential Questions to Ask Your Doctor During Sexual and Reproductive Health Appointments (Continued)

### Screening and Prevention

- When and how often do I need preventative test like Pap smears and other screenings?
- Can you show me how to check my breasts for changes?
- If I am vaccinated for HPV, do I still need cervical cancer screening?
- What does it mean when my test results are “abnormal”, and what happens, next?

### Privacy and Support

- Can I talk about any concerns related to sexual health or relationships confidentially?
- What resources are available if I experience sexual assault, coercion, or stress related to sexual health?
- How can I access emergency contraception and abortion services confidentially and safely? Can you show me how to check my breasts for changes?
- If I am vaccinated for HPV, do I still need cervical cancer screening?
- What does it mean when my test results are “abnormal”, and what happens, next?



# HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS

## What's HPV?

Human papillomavirus (HPV) is a highly common sexually transmitted infection. While there are over 200 types of HPV, only about 40 strains are known to affect the genital area. When we talk about HPV as an STI, we're referring to specific strains of the virus that are spread through genital contact: vaginal or anal intercourse, genital-genital contact, and rarely through oral or manual sex. Some strains cause genital warts (which do not cause cervical cancer) and are highly contagious, while other strains do not cause symptoms but can lead to cervical cancer. Though rare, HPV can also cause penile and anal cancer.

## How common is it?

HPV is extremely common. The CDC estimates that in the United States, about 1 in 4 people are infected with a sexually transmitted strain of HPV. Almost everyone who is sexually active in the U.S. will get infected with HPV at some point if they haven't been vaccinated. Since the vaccine targets the types of HPV that cause cancer, many sexually active people will still get infected with some type of HPV even after getting vaccinated.

## Types of HPV?

Low-risk HPV: Can cause genital warts; no danger to your health.

High-risk HPV: Can increase the risk for several cancers, especially cervical cancer. These are the ones we want to test for and prevent.

## How is HPV spread?

HPV is spread through skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity, including vaginal, anal, oral, and manual sex. HPV can also be spread through direct contact with infected skin even without the exchange of bodily fluids. The virus can affect areas including the mouth, throat, and genitals. Most people with HPV don't have symptoms and often don't know they have it. When symptoms appear, they may notice small, cauliflower-like clusters of warts on or around the genitals or anus.

## When to see a doctor?

If you notice genital warts, unusual lumps, or skin changes in the genital area, or after an abnormal Pap test result, it is important to follow up with your healthcare provider. Regular screening and open discussion with your provider are essential for early detection and management of HPV-related health issues.

## What happens after becoming infected with HPV?

High-risk strains of HPV do not cause warts, so you won't know if you're infected unless you get tested. Low-risk HPV may cause warts, which are harmless and usually disappear on their own. Most high-risk HPV infections also clear up on their own; however, a small percentage can persist and may eventually lead to cancer. These high-risk HPV strains can cause cancer in the genital area, mouth and throat, and the anus and rectum. Anyone, regardless of gender, can develop cancer linked to HPV. Nearly all cases of cervical and anal cancer are caused by HPV, and after tobacco use, HPV is the leading cause of oral and throat cancers.

# HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (CONT.)

## HPV Risk Factors

- Unprotected anal sex without a condom
- Unprotected vaginal sex without a condom
- Manual sex without gloves or finger cots
- Having multiple sexual partners
- A weakened immune system
- Smoking tobacco

## PREVENTION

### HPV Vaccine

Getting vaccinated can significantly lower your risk of contracting high-risk strains and help prevent future health problems. Currently, the HPV vaccine protects against 9 different strains, including the most common strains that cause cancer. It is important to remember that even after being vaccinated with the HPV vaccine, it is still possible to get warts from strains of HPV that the vaccine does not protect against. Research has shown that the HPV vaccine is both safe and effective. It is recommended that children receive the HPV vaccine between the ages of 11 and 12—ideally before having any type of sex.

