

## A Word About Sexually Transmitted Infections

By Dr. March

Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) consist of a number of bacteria, viruses, and other organisms. Those we can commonly test for include:

1. Gonorrhea
2. Chlamydia
3. Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV)
4. Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)
5. Hepatitis (Hep B, Hep C mostly)
6. Human Immunodeficiency Virus, HIV
7. Syphilis

Keep in mind a "Pap smear" does not test for STI's ... additional, separate and specific tests must be performed for STI's.

Abstinence or completely mutual monogamy are the ONLY ways to protect yourself from getting an STI. Condoms have been advertised to provide "safe sex" or "safer sex". While a condom is not as bad as a screen door on a submarine, condoms can actually allow organisms that cause STI's to pass through to your body. For example, condoms can prevent about 85% of HIV infection over the course of one year. Taken over a 5-year time period, however, this means that 56 out of 100 women in this category will have contracted HIV. The risk of catching an STI is even greater if condom use is skipped at any time, even just once! While it is true condoms can provide a certain level of protection, and are recommended for "safer sex", it is wise to know their limitations and adjust your behavior accordingly. Limiting your sexual partners can also help reduce your risk. In Africa, the ONLY programs that have shown a significant reduction in HIV have used abstinence-based education.

Gonorrhea and Chlamydia should always be mentioned together, because over 30% of the time, if a woman has one of these, she also has the other! They are two of the more COMMON STI's. These bacteria produce no symptoms in many women. They CAN cause pain and vaginal discharge, or severe inflammatory disease called PID. These 2 characters can cause permanent tubal damage and put you at risk for tubal pregnancy or even infertility if not treated. Occasionally, with PID, they can lead to hospitalization and IV antibiotics. Many women should be tested at their yearly exam for these. They are diagnosed with a "Q-tip" swab of your cervix done at the time of a Pap smear.

Herpes is probably the most common STI in the U.S., and most worrisome, over half of those infected do not even know it! It is typically more of a nuisance than a health risk, although there are some important points to keep in mind when you are pregnant and carry HSV. Dr. March can discuss these points in detail with you. There are very safe medicines that can prevent outbreaks over the long term, too. HSV is diagnosed by culture of the ulcer lesion on the vagina. Not as diagnostic for genital infection, blood testing can be done.

Many, if not most, sexually-active woman have been exposed to Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). HPV comes in many varieties; there are over 80 sub-types. The good news is many cause no known symptoms or problems. Although some cause genital warts, these can usually be treated very effectively. Your immune system is also a strong weapon against these warts. Several sub-types are strongly associated with cervical and vaginal cancer. A yearly Pap smear is used to detect changes before cancer actually develops. We treat a large number of woman in our office with pre-cancer changes of the cervix, but we don't see much cervical cancer any more. The modern age of universal annual Pap smear screening and in-office treatment has made cervical cancer the Number 10 cancer among women in the United States ... it was Number 1 prior to this modern age!

Hepatitis B, Hep C, and HIV are all transmitted in the same way, from blood and body fluids into your circulation. The main risk factors for woman include hemophilia (although blood transfusions have become very safe the past 10 years), IV drug use and sex with men who use IV drugs or with men who are homosexual/bisexual. Recent CDC data tells us 64% of new HIV cases occur in women. Among women, teens age 13-19 years old are at highest risk, and 74% of new cases in woman occurred in African-Americans. Hep B and C are actually more common than HIV, and women at risk for HIV should be tested for Hep B and C. Hep B and C, and HIV are all diagnosed by blood tests. There is a very effective vaccine for Hep B. HIV transmission from a mother to her baby can be reduced from about 30% to about 5-8% with proper medication.

Syphilis is still fairly rare but is making a "comeback" in some regions. It can cause very serious health problems over a number of years if untreated. Like Herpes, it is spread through direct contact. It is diagnosed with a blood test.

There are several other STI's and much more to say about the ones we discussed above. Feel free to browse our other web pages on this topic. A much more detailed look at HPV can be found in our section on "Pap Smears, HPV & Dysplasia".

If you would like to be tested, feel you need to be tested, or have any questions, feel free to give our office a call.

Good health, from Dr. March !!