

Office of Research on Women's Health



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Sexually Transmitted Infections

Understanding These Infections and Planning for Future Research and Prevention
MARCH 2006 NIH Scientific Workshop Focuses the Discussion

What Are STIs?

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), commonly called sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), are often undetectable. They can be transmitted by those affected to unsuspecting partners during intimate physical contact, including sex, through oral, anal, or vaginal routes. More than 20 different kinds of STIs have been identified. These can be grouped by origin:

- **STIs caused by bacteria** can be treated and often cured with antibiotics. Among these are chlamydia, gonorrhea, trichomoniasis, and syphilis.
- **STIs caused by viruses** can be controlled, but not cured. Viral STIs include HIV/AIDS, genital herpes, genital warts, human papilloma virus (HPV), hepatitis B virus, and cytomegalovirus.

Why Are STIs Important?

STIs present a major public health problem, both nationally and globally. Not only do they have devastating effects on the health of women and their children, but having an STI greatly increases the risk for developing HIV and AIDS. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that 19 million new infections are reported each year in the U.S. with direct medical costs estimated at \$14.1 billion. The numbers reflect only those cases that have been diagnosed and reported. Many cases of human papilloma virus and genital herpes, highly prevalent viruses, are not reported at all presenting an even greater risk for transmission. The U.S. must also be concerned with the global impact and spread of STIs since the rates in Africa are slightly more than double and those in Asia triple our reported figures. Young people, ages 15 to 24, account for almost half of these new STIs.

Why Are STIs a Women's Issue?

Women are more susceptible to and affected by STIs and their consequences. Young adolescent girls are most vulnerable to contracting STIs because of the normal hormonal changes that occur in puberty, the limited exposure of their immune systems, and their increase in cervical abnormalities. Despite these biologic risks, adolescents are not usually attuned to these diseases and are often more concerned about pregnancy than they are of contracting an STI. If symptoms develop, they are often minor or nonspecific, particularly in the early stages of an STI. Symptoms may also be attributed to other diseases that are not associated with sexual contact (e.g., yeast and urinary tract infections). As a result, STIs in women sometimes are not diagnosed until after serious problems have developed. For example, women with gonorrhea or chlamydia can develop pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), which can lead to ectopic pregnancy and infertility. STIs in pregnant women may result in perinatal infection with adverse effects to the fetus or newborn, including death. STIs are often the source of lifelong chronic pelvic pain conditions.

Most importantly, having an STI puts women in this sexually active group at a 6-7 fold risk for contracting HIV and a 5 fold risk for transmitting the virus to an unsuspecting partner. In the U.S., HIV/AIDS is the sixth leading cause of death among all women aged 25 to 34 and the fourth leading cause of death among all women aged 35 to 44.

How Can Women Prevent STIs?

The only way for women to ensure that they will not contract an STI is to avoid all types of intimate sexual contact. However, if women are sexually active, there are several ways they can

