

How STDs Impact Women Differently From Men

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) remain a major public health challenge in the U.S., especially among women, who disproportionately bear the long-term consequences of STDs. For example, each year untreated STDs cause infertility in at least 20,000 women in the U.S., and untreated syphilis in pregnant women results in infant death in up to 40 percent of cases. Testing and treatment are keys to reducing disease and infertility associated with undiagnosed STDs.

How do STDs impact women differently from men?

1 Women are less likely than men to have symptoms of common STDs such as chlamydia and gonorrhea.

- If symptoms do occur, they can go away even though the infection may remain.

2 Women are more likely than men to confuse symptoms of an STD for something else.

- Women often have normal discharge or think that burning/itching is related to a yeast infection.
- Men usually notice symptoms like discharge because it is unusual.

3 Women may not see symptoms as easily as men.

- Genital ulcers (like from herpes or syphilis) can occur in the vagina and may not be easily visible, while men may be more likely to notice sores on their penis.

4 Women typically see their doctor more often than men.

- Women should use this time with their doctor as an opportunity to ask for STD testing, and not assume STD testing is part of their annual exam. While the Pap test screens for cervical cancer, it is not a good test for other types of cancer or STDs.

5 A woman's anatomy can place her at a unique risk for STD infection.

- The lining of the vagina is thinner and more delicate than the skin on a penis, so it's easier for bacteria and viruses to penetrate.
- The vagina is a good environment for bacteria to grow.

6 STDs can lead to serious health complications and affect a woman's future reproductive plans.

- Untreated STDs can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, which can result in infertility and ectopic pregnancy.

7 Women who are pregnant can pass STDs to their babies.

- Genital herpes, syphilis and HIV can be passed to babies during pregnancy and at delivery.
- The harmful effects of STDs in babies may include stillbirth, low birth weight (less than five pounds), brain damage, blindness and deafness.

8 Human papillomavirus (HPV) is the most common sexually transmitted infection in women, and is the main cause of cervical cancer.

- While HPV is also very common in men, most do not develop any serious health problems.



The Good News

Most common STDs are preventable and curable.

- There is a vaccine to prevent HPV.
- Most STDs can be cured with antibiotics, averting serious health consequences and preventing transmission to others.

There are resources available for women to learn how to protect themselves and their partners from STDs, and where to receive testing and treatment.

- **Healthcare providers** — A doctor or physician can provide patient-specific information about STD prevention, protection and tests.
- **1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636)** — Operators can provide information about local STD testing sites and put callers in touch with trained professionals to answer questions about STDs.
- **GetTested.cdc.gov** — This website provides users with locations for HIV, STD, and hepatitis testing and STD and hepatitis vaccines around the United States.
- **www.cdc.gov/std** — CDC's website includes comprehensive information about STDs, including fact sheets on STDs and Pregnancy (www.cdc.gov/std/pregnancy) and STDs and Infertility (www.cdc.gov/std/infertility).

If you are a member of the news media, please visit www.cdc.gov/nchhstp/Newsroom or contact the News Media Line at CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention: 404-639-8895 or NCHHSTPMediaTeam@cdc.gov.

Other information requests may be directed to the Division of STD Prevention (www.cdc.gov/std) or the CDC-INFO Contact Center: 800-CDC-INFO (800-232-4636).