

10 Ways 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 24,000 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.

Why are women so severely affected by STDs? Below are 10 ways STDs impact women differently from men.

1 A woman's anatomy can place her at a unique risk for STD infection, compared to a man.

- 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 (moist) for bacteria to grow

2 Women are less likely to have symptoms of common STDs — such as chlamydia and gonorrhea — compared to men.

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

3 Women are more likely 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

4 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

5 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
- Chlamydia (one of the most common STDs) results in few complications in men

6 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 (a baby that is born dead), low birth weight (less than five pounds), brain damage, blindness and deafness

7 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

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8 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.

9 There is a vaccine to prevent HPV; and available treatments for other STDs can prevent serious health consequences, such as infertility, if diagnosed and treated early.

10 There are resources available for women to learn more about actions they can take 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
- **FindSTDTest.org** — This website provides users with locations for HIV and STD testing and STD 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)