Stop The
SPREAD

FROM HOW THEY ARE TRANSMITTED TO HOW THEY CAN BE TREATED AND WHERE YOU CAN GET TESTED, HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT SEXUALLY-TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS.

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CHLAMYDIA, GONORRHOEA, GENITAL HERPES, HIV/AIDS — the mere mention of these diseases invariably brings on a shudder. Ironically, it is this aversion that hinders efforts to stop the spread of such sexually-transmitted infections (STIs).

What are STIs? As the name suggests, they refer to a host of conditions that can be spread by sexual contact. These can take the form of bacterial, viral, fungal or parasitic infections.

Bacterial infections such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea, and viral infections such as genital herpes are the most common in Singapore, according to Dr Priya Sen, Head of Department of STI Control and Senior Consultant Dermatologist with the National Skin Centre (NSC).

Other types of STIs such as vaginal thrush — a fungal infection — and parasites like pubic lice or scabies are also common. These are usually passed from one infected person to another through unprotected oral, vaginal or anal sex. "STIs are spread through intimate contact with infected urethral or vaginal secretions," says Dr Sen who adds that anal sex carries a higher risk of spreading STIs than other types of intercourse. "This is because the lining of the anus is thin and can easily be damaged, making it more vulnerable to infection."

STIs like the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) can also be spread through blood transfusions or the sharing of infected needles. They can also be transmitted from an infected mother to her baby during childbirth. Contrary to popular belief, STIs cannot be transmitted through casual activities like shaking hands and hugging, using public toilet seats or the sharing of meals. In Singapore, all blood products are thoroughly screened for HIV and STIs prior to administration.

Prevention is Key

According to Dr Sen, three groups of people have a higher chance of contracting STIs — those who frequent sex workers, men who have sex with other men and those who engage in casual sex without using condoms. "If you belong to one of these groups, have had unprotected sex, or have multiple sexual partners, you should go for a regular sexual health screening," advises Dr Sen.

Using a condom will also lower your chances of contracting STIs. Dr Sen says the correct and consistent use of latex condoms can significantly reduce the risk of most STI transmissions. Vaccinations are also available for certain STIs such as the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV) which causes genital warts and the Hepatitis B virus. These vaccinations can help prevent infections.

> ❝ STIs CANNOT BE TRANSMITTED THROUGH CASUAL SOCIAL ACTIVITIES LIKE SHAKING HANDS AND HUGGING, USING PUBLIC TOILET SEATS OR THE SHARING OF MEALS

Most STIs can be treated successfully through the use of antibiotics, antiviral, or anti-fungal medication. Parasitic infections such as pubic lice can be treated using insecticide creams and shampoos. Additional medication such as hydrocortisone cream and painkillers might also be prescribed to treat symptoms and relieve discomfort. However, not all STIs can be treated and cured. That is why prevention is key when it comes to incurable STIs such as HIV.

The HIV Situation

In 2008, the reported rate of HIV infections in Singapore reached an all-time high with 125.2 new cases reported per million people. This number has dipped slightly to 121.7 reported cases per million people in 2011 — but that doesn't mean that HIV is any less of a concern than it used to be. It is also not confined exclusively to men who indulge in homosexual sex either.

(STIs)

According to Dr Gavin Ong, Associate Consultant Dermatologist with the NSC, heterosexual sex (between a man and woman) accounts for most of the new HIV cases in Singapore. There has however been a rise in the number of new infections acquired through homosexual and bisexual sex. "Also of concern is that a significant proportion of new cases diagnosed are late-stage infections. This shows that many are still not coming forward for voluntary testing early," he says.

Early testing can lead to timely care and treatment. Without testing, people who have HIV and don't know it face a greater risk for serious health problems and early death. They might also spread the virus to others unknowingly. A 2011 study also found that early detection — and thus early treatment — can reduce the risk of HIV being spread from pregnant HIV-positive women to their children.

In Singapore, it is an offence under the Infectious Diseases Act for people who know they are infected with HIV not to inform their sex partners of their status before sexual intercourse. The Act also requires those who have reason to believe that they might be exposed to HIV to take precautions to protect their sexual partners by using condoms. This is applicable even if they are ignorant of their HIV status. Getting tested for HIV will ensure that you are not breaking the law by unwittingly infecting your partners.

The best time to screen for HIV infection is during the first and third month from the last sexual contact as it can take up to three months for the virus to manifest. If an individual goes for a screening too early, he or she may have a false negative screen result. For high-risk individuals, a HIV screening is recommended once every six months.

To date, HIV remains incurable but it can be treated. Many new drugs have been made available for people with HIV infections. These drugs are normally taken in combination and are effective in suppressing the infection. However, Dr Ong says currently there is no effective vaccine against HIV despite clinical trials conducted worldwide. If left untreated, HIV can progress to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) that is the last and most severe stage of the infection. People with AIDS suffer from a weakened immune system and are more likely to develop certain cancers and diseases such as pneumonia. **LW**

> ## EARLY DETECTION, AND THUS EARLY TREATMENT, CAN REDUCE THE RISK OF HIV BEING SPREAD FROM PREGNANT HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN TO THEIR CHILDREN

GET TESTED!

If you fall into a high-risk group or suspect you have an STI, you should get tested. Any delay in getting tested means a delay in treatment, and this can lead to serious health complications. Many STIs can be easily tested with a swab, urine or blood test. These tests are available at:
THE DSC CLINIC
Block 31 Kelantan Lane
Singapore 200031
Tel: 6293 9648

Services offered:
- Affordable, confidential and comprehensive STI screening
- Specialist STI consultation
- Vaccinations
- Counselling

The DSC Clinic also operates separate clinics for men and women. The DSC assures that your medical information will not be divulged to a third party without your consent.

THE TRUTH ABOUT STIs

Many people are in the dark about such infections. Dr Priya Sen, Head of Department of STI Control and Senior Consultant Dermatologist with the NSC, sheds light on three common misconceptions people have about STIs.

➤ **"I had a workplace health check recently, so I'm completely clean."**
Not all medical screenings include a comprehensive STI test. Some screenings include syphilis and HIV testing while others don't. You should ask your doctor which tests are included, and which are not. Your best option is to visit a sexual health clinic. The doctors there will be able to screen you for your risks and advise you on which tests you should get.

➤ **"I can tell if someone has a sexually-transmitted infection."**
Many people who have an infection often do not show any signs or symptoms. They can look healthy and live normally. A sexual health check-up will give a definitive answer.

➤ **"I should use two condoms to double the protection against STIs."**
Do not ever use two condoms at the same time. Condoms provide a good protective barrier when used correctly, but using two condoms at the same time will not only increase friction, but also increase the risk of condom breakage. Broken condoms can lead to infections.