



Advice and facts about sexually transmitted infections

This fact sheet provides knowledge about how to have safer sex and thereby protect yourself against sexually transmitted infections. Chlamydia is one such infection, as is HIV. Here you will find information on some of the most common infections and which complications may arise if you do not receive medical treatment. You will also receive tips on where to turn for advice and where you can be tested.

Sexually Transmitted Infections are known by the acronym STIs. They are the same as venereal diseases.

Sexual encounters

Having sex can be a positive part of life. Sexual encounters are in many cases an expression of desire and acknowledgement. Sex can be much more than vaginal intercourse, anal sex or oral sex. Having sex does not necessarily mean that the penis is inserted into the vagina, rectum or mouth. Masturbating together is having sex. Using sex toys alone or together with someone else is also having sex. In a sexual encounter with another person, there is always a risk of sexually transmitted infections.

What causes infections?

Sexually transmitted infections are caused by bacteria or viruses. The infections described here are:

- chlamydia (bacteria)
- mycoplasma genitalium (bacteria)
- gonorrhoea (bacteria)
- syphilis (bacteria)
- HIV (virus)
- condyloma (virus)
- herpes (virus)
- hepatitis (virus).

The mucus membrane is the thin tissue found in the urethra, mouth, throat, vagina and rectum. Bacteria and viruses that cause venereal diseases normally enter here where disease is present. Condyloma, herpes and syph-

ilis can also be present on the skin around the genitals. Bacteria and viruses can also be present in sperm, vaginal secretions, pus and blood. HIV and hepatitis are examples of this.

An infection caused by bacteria can be cured. An infection caused by a virus is seldom curable via treatment with pharmaceuticals. The symptoms can however be alleviated and the progression of the disease slowed. You can be vaccinated against certain types of condyloma (HPV) and hepatitis A and B.

If you do not receive treatment for a current infection, you can have complications which affect your health in different ways.

When can you get an infection?

All people, regardless of age, gender and sexual orientation, can get a sexually transmitted infection. Regardless of whether you have sex with women or men, are heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual, you can be infected. To get a sexually transmitted infection, you must have unprotected sex with a person who carries the bacteria or virus that cause such infections.

You will be unable to tell whether or not a person is carrying an infection, and not everyone that has an infection is aware of it. A number of venereal diseases have no symptoms, especially at the beginning of an infection. It is not certain you will notice that you have been infected. You may therefore get an infection from your sexual partner without either of you being aware of it. This also means that you may yourself unintentionally spread an infection to a partner. It is enough for you to have sex with a single partner to get an infection. If you have sex with several partners, the likelihood that you get or transmit an infection increases.

Some infections are transmitted more easily than others

Unprotected sex means not using protection such as a condom during a sexual encounter. The likelihood that various infections are transmitted thereby increases. The risk may also vary depending on the manner in which you have unprotected sex, i.e., if you have unprotected vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse or oral sex. Some infections are transmitted more easily than others. Chlamydia is transmitted more easily than HIV, for example. It is enough



to in some way come into contact with the mucus membrane of a sex organ in order for the chlamydia bacteria to be transmitted. This means you do not need to have vaginal or other forms of intercourse in order to get chlamydia.

When you have an untreated venereal disease, other infections can be more easily transmitted. If for example you already have chlamydia, you are more receptive to other sexually transmitted infections such as syphilis, condyloma, herpes or HIV. Some of these you cannot get rid of despite medical treatment. Medical treatment for viral infections can however slow the progression of the disease and alleviate the symptoms. You can protect yourself against infections and have sex in a safer manner.

Condoms are a good form of protection

You yourself can reduce the risk that you and your sexual partner will get a sexually transmitted infection by using condoms or dental dams. You should use condoms for all types of sex whereby the penis is either inserted into the vagina, the rectum or the mouth. The condom must remain on the penis throughout the intercourse. If the condom slips off or breaks, the intercourse is unprotected. Correct and consistent use of protection considerably reduces the risk of transmitting bacteria and viruses.

Protection against pregnancy

The condom is a good form of protection for both men and women. It prevents the transmission of bacteria and viruses, including HIV. If used correctly, the condom also provides good protection against unwanted pregnancy. But in order to have safe protection against unwanted pregnancies, this should be complemented with a hormonal contraceptive such as birth control pills, Nexplanon or IUD (intrauterine device). Only condoms protect against HIV and other venereal diseases. If the condom has broken during intercourse, as a woman you can take emergency birth control pills to reduce the risk of pregnancy.

A habit with shared responsibility

Make it a habit of using a condom with temporary sex partners or when you initiate a new relationship. If you initiate a relationship you can together use a condom for at least three months at the start of the relationship. During this time you can get tested together and exclude that either of you have an infection such as gonorrhoea or chlamydia. However, for some sexually transmitted infections, such as syphilis and hepatitis, it may take up to three months after infection before the test, completely, can show the infection. Therefore you should continue with a condom for three months after being tested. If both of you are negative then, i.e. you do not have any venereal disease, if you want you can refrain from using a condom in the relationship.

To use protection is to show respect and consideration, both for yourself and your sexual partner. Surveys among young Swedes, including UngKAB09¹, reveal that the majority think it is positive if a partner suggests that they use condoms together to protect one another.

It is not only one person's responsibility to protect others against infection in sexual encounters. The responsibility is distributed equally between you and the person you have sex with. You should therefore ask your partner for a condom if you yourself have forgotten to bring one with you when you are about to have sex. It's always a good idea to carry several in reserve.

Get tested if ...

- you have had unprotected sex
- you suspect that you may have been infected
- you have symptoms that indicate you are carrying an infection
- your sexual partner has an infection
- the condom you were using broke and you suspect that you have an infection

If you are found to have a sexually transmitted infection, your partner should also be tested.

If you have had an infection, you may be tested again six months after treatment has ceased. This way you can ensure you have not been reinfected. If you have had unprotected sex again with a new partner before six months have passed, you should of course get tested earlier. In this case, four weeks should have passed following treatment with antibiotics so that the test can be certain.

Rights and responsibilities

A number of the infections we account for here are included in the Communicable Diseases Act. These are diseases that are considered so serious to the individual and/or society that those infected must be offered care and treatment, and other persons close to them may need protection, e.g., by means of vaccination, in order to prevent the further spread of infection. The Communicable Diseases Act covers some sixty or more communicable diseases. Among infections that are solely or normally transmitted through sex, the ones covered by the act are HIV, chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhoea and hepatitis B. Hepatitis A and C, which are sometimes transmitted sexually, are also included in the act. Among other things, this means that testing and treatment are free. You can also receive advice and special support if required. By getting tested, you will know whether or not you have an infection. This way, you can in most cases receive treatment and get rid of the infection or the symptoms.

1. Carried out in 2009 by the University of Gothenburg on commission from the National Board of Health and Welfare. Over 15,000 people aged 15–29 answered the survey, which contained questions about knowledge, attitudes and sexual acts among young people. Read more on www.ungkab.se



If you have contracted a disease which is included in the Communicable Diseases Act, you must assist with contact tracing. You must inform of whom you believe you may have been infected by. Normally, you will give the names of your partners over the past year, as it can be difficult to determine when and by whom you have been infected. You must also tell to whom you may have spread the disease to before you were aware of your infection. These persons are then contacted so that they can be tested and offered treatment if they are found to be infected. If you do not wish to contact them yourself, the health service will assist with this. Those of your partners that the health service contacts will not be informed of who gave their names, for reasons of medical confidentiality.

Find protection that suits you

- Condoms can be bought from many places, such as in supermarkets, at petrol stations, in pharmacies and via the internet.
- They are also often available free or at a low price at youth clinics or other clinics that provide treatment for sexually transmitted infections.
- Regardless of whether or not you are circumcised, the condom is a good form of protection. Condoms are available in different sizes. Try out different ones until you find a brand that suits you. Use the condom correctly and consistently.
- Condoms are made from latex, and they are often pre-treated with lubricant. If you or your sexual partner are allergic to latex, there are latex-free condoms available for purchase.
- You can also purchase dry condoms, to which you can apply water- or silicon-based lubricant yourself.
- “Vaginal” condoms (referred to as “female condoms” in English and previously “femidoms”) are named based on where this type of condom is normally placed; namely the vagina or anally in the rectum, regardless of gender, gender expression and sexual orientation. To simplify, we can describe the female condom as a larger condom. It can be an alternative when normal condoms are either too large or too small. Female condoms can be inserted several hours before sex, unlike normal condoms which must be put on immediately before sex. One advantage is therefore that this type of condom does not lead to the same kind of interruption. Note that they are disposable and should not be reused. There are various brands of female condoms, but they are still relatively unknown to the Swedish public. It is easiest to buy them online.
- A dental dam can be an alternative form of protection for oral sex. It is a thin film of rubber or latex that you can lay over the vagina or anus when having oral sex. It can be purchased online and in specialist shops. A dental dam should be of a certain size, often 15 x 25 cm or smaller if worn as a “mouthguard” – fastened with a

strap behind the ears. It is not recommended to make your own dental dam by cutting up a condom as this will be much too small to completely cover the affected area. As the handling of dental dams differs entirely depending on the individual's habits and technique, there is a general lack of studies in the area which show just how effective dental dams are as a means of protection.

- You should preferably have a number of these in reserve when you plan to have sex.

The right way to handle protection

- Handle protection carefully. Teeth, stubble in the genital area and sharp nails can damage the protection. Condoms that are subjected to sunlight and warmth or left in a wallet age quicker. You should therefore exchange them often.
- All types of condoms, and even dental dams, are perishable. There is always a best before date on the packaging. Adhere to it.
- Never use double condoms when having sex. This does not provide extra protection. On the contrary, it increases the risk of breakages.
- Men who are not used to using condoms can practice when masturbating. First pull back the foreskin towards your body before slipping on the condom. Pinch the top of the condom when sliding it onto your penis. This is to avoid increased friction resulting from air trapped in the tip, as this increases the risk of breakages.
- If you are circumcised, you can use a small amount of lubricant on the tip of your penis before putting on the condom. This may also enhance the pleasure. If you use too much, however, the condom may slip off.
- When using lubricant, it must be water or silicon-based. Lubricant with fat and oil weaken the protection, which can in turn mean that it breaks.
- Always use condoms on dildos and sex toys if you share them with someone. Bacteria and viruses can be transmitted between you and your sexual partner if you share sex toys.

Further tips and advice on condoms and more besides can be found on some of the recommended websites found at the end of this fact sheet.

Sex when travelling

Sexually transmitted infections are found in Sweden as well as in every other country in the world. HIV and other venereal diseases are in many cases more common in other countries. Chlamydia is however at least as common in Sweden as in other countries. Make it a habit to always take condoms with you when travelling in Sweden or abroad.

Having unprotected sex abroad can sometimes entail a greater risk than having unprotected sex in Sweden,



regardless of whether you have vaginal intercourse, anal sex or oral sex. This is especially true for touristic towns and popular destinations where people from many different countries meet and potentially make sexual contact.

There are differences in the health services in different countries, both within Europe and outside. The opportunities for testing differ from one country to the next. Similarly, the access to medicine for e.g., HIV differs. Many are unaware that they have been infected with HIV and therefore do not take a test. Furthermore, they have as a result of this not had any treatment to reduce the infectiousness. Other venereal diseases may also be untreated or improperly treated, and thus remain.

Use condoms if you have vaginal intercourse, anal sex or oral sex on your travels. If you have had unprotected sex with someone on your travels, it is important that you make an appointment to be tested when you return. If you have received treatment for a sexually transmitted infection abroad, you should always contact health services when you return, even if you have no residual symptoms. This is to be sure the infection has passed.

Advice and tests

You can go for an examination or receive advice at various clinics in the county where you live, for example at

- the youth clinic
- “Elevhälsan” (the School Health Services)
- the STI, skin, vein and sexual health clinic
- “Studenthälsan” (the Student Health Unit)
- the gynaecology clinic
- the Health Care Centre
- the antenatal clinic
- the Sex and relationship clinic (Sesam)
- the infectious disease clinic
- your county council or region’s website.

In some parts of the country, organisations such as Noaks Ark, RFSU and RFSL provide advice and testing; see the respective organisation’s website.

In addition, in most county councils in Sweden you can order a chlamydia test online. For more information, visit your county council or region’s website, as well as klamydiatest.nu or klamya.se.

Homosexual and bisexual clinics

In some large cities there are special clinics for men who have sex with men. In Göteborg there is Gayhälsan (Gay Health) at Sahlgrenska University Hospital, and in Stockholm you will find Venhälsan at Stockholm South General Hospital. In Malmö, men who have sex with men are among the target groups of Centrum för sexuell hälsa (Sexual Health Centre). Malmö and Stockholm also have RFSL Rådgivningen which offers HIV testing.

Special clinics for women who have sex with women are less common. In Stockholm, there is a gynaecological clinic for lesbian and bisexual women. Other major cities are home to clinics with special opening hours for women who have sex with women. Look up your county council’s website for more information.

Would you like to know more?

There are many good websites that provide information about condoms, HIV and other sexually transmitted infections:

www.1177.se
www.umo.se (youth clinic online)
www.sakraresex.se
www.sentry.nu
www.rfsl.se
www.rfslungdom.se
www.sexperterna.com
www.rfsu.se
www.hiv-sverige.se
www.noaksark.org
www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se

If you have any questions about HIV, you can also contact **Noaks Ark** directly on **020-78 44 40**.

HIV and sexually transmitted infections exist. Knowledge helps.

