

What if a woman's partner refuses to use condoms? This can be very difficult. But it's important to remember there's only one way a woman can protect her health - by insisting her partner wear a condom.

Will douching prevent infection? Some women believe that flushing the vagina with water or antiseptic is good hygiene and prevents infection. But douching doesn't prevent infection, and may cause problems by destroying useful bacteria in the vagina which help keep the area healthy.

When should a pregnant woman be tested for STDs? If there's a possibility that a pregnant woman could have an STD, it's important that she tell her doctor so any infection can be detected and treated. Some STDs can cause serious problems for the baby.

There are Sexual Health Centres in many areas of the Sydney Metropolitan Area and NSW, and are listed under "Sexual Health Centres" in the White Pages of the telephone book. Some centres have bilingual workers. Interpreters can be arranged, if necessary.

If you need help making phone calls in English, ring the Translating and Interpreting Service on (TIS) on 131 450.

You can find more health information in your language on the Multicultural Communication website at <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>

Telephone numbers are correct at time of publication but are not continually updated. You may need to check the numbers in the telephone directory.

NSW Multicultural Health Communication Service
Website: <http://www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au>
Email: mhcs@sesiahs.health.nsw.gov.au
Tel: (02) 9816 0347

Myths and facts about sexual health

Myths and facts about sexual health

Because sexual health is something people don't often talk about, it's not surprising that there are many misunderstandings about the issue. Yet knowing how to care for this aspect of our health is as important as caring for any other. Here are some facts to be aware of.

What is a sexually transmitted disease (STD)? Any disease which is passed from one person to another by sexual contact (meaning vaginal, oral or anal sex). Some people think the only sexually transmitted diseases are syphilis and gonorrhoea. But there are many different kinds of STDs, ranging from mild genital irritation to diseases which can cause infertility or serious illness if they're not treated. Some people don't realise HIV is also a sexually transmitted disease. It affects both sexes and can lead to AIDS which can be fatal. Hepatitis B, which can also be fatal, can be passed on during sex.

Who gets STDs? It's not true that only certain sorts of people get STDs. These infections can affect anyone.

How can someone tell if they have an STD? Sometimes they can't. Some infections have no obvious symptoms. Chlamydia, for instance, is a very common STD, especially common among 15 to 24-year-olds. Although it affects both sexes, there may be no noticeable symptoms in women. Untreated, chlamydia can cause a more serious infection called Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID) which can cause infertility. Any of the following symptoms could mean a person has an STD:

- unusual discharge from the vagina or penis
- a burning pain, stinging or irritation when urinating
- a sore, blister, ulcer, wart or break in the skin

- a rash in the genital area
- low abdominal pain or pain during intercourse
- a rash which appears on the palms of the hands or soles of the feet, but which isn't itchy.

These symptoms don't necessarily mean an STD, but see a doctor just in case. The only way to be sure you have - or don't have - an STD is to have a test. STD testing is confidential and available from Sexual Health Centres, women's health centres, Family Planning Clinics and GPs. Most services at Sexual Health Centres are free. Anyone attending these centres need not provide their real name or show their Medicare card if they prefer not to.

How can you tell if someone else has a sexually transmitted disease?

With most infections, you can't. Some people think that if someone looks clean and well dressed they can't have an STD. But many nice, clean, well dressed people have STDs - remember, they can affect anyone.

What's the best way to avoid STDs? One is to not have sex. Another way is to have sex with only one partner - someone who isn't having sex with anyone else. But even if you only have one partner, you're still at risk from infection if that partner has sex with another person without using condoms. Using condoms helps prevent STDs. It's important to use them if

- a) you're not sure your partner is free of infection, or
- b) you've had unprotected sex with someone other than your partner.

When can a couple stop using condoms in a relationship?

When they're confident both are free of infection. The only way to be sure is for both partners to have an STD test and to be certain they won't have unsafe sex outside the relationship.