

# STIs On The Rise: What You Need to Know

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Today, one in five Americans has an sexually transmitted infection (STI). Some STIs can be cured with medication, while others can only be treated to manage symptoms, but not cured.

Currently STIs are on the rise – in fact, the number of cases of sexually transmitted infections doubled in Snohomish County between 2019-2022. For single, partnered, and married individuals, all STIs are preventable by taking a few precautions.

However, for a lot of people, STIs are an embarrassing topic, making it hard to ask a partner or healthcare provider questions that could keep them safe from infection, or even to get the necessary treatment if infected. This makes it even more important that everyone learns how to prevent STIs and what to do if you do become infected.

## What Are Sexually Transmitted Infections

STIs, also referred to as STDs, is an umbrella term for any bacterial, parasitic, or viral infection whose primary mode of transmission is through sexual contact (which can be anal, oral, or vaginal). Some sexually transmitted Infections can also be spread through other pathways such as blood transfusions, needle-sharing, or through pregnancy and childbirth.

A sexually transmitted disease develops from a sexually transmitted infection.

## Common STIs

Common sexually transmitted infections include:

- HIV
- HPV
- Chlamydia
- Gonorrhea
- Syphilis
- Herpes
- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B

## HIV

One of the most well-known STIs is HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Left untreated, HIV may develop into AIDS, which can be fatal.

Once considered a death sentence, HIV is now a chronic disease that can be managed with medication. There is no cure for HIV, and treating it requires a daily cocktail of drugs for the rest of the patient's life. But with proper treatment, the patient can maintain a positive quality of life for many years.

## HPV

More common than HIV is HPV (Human Papillomavirus), the most widespread STI in the United States, with as many as 43 million cases a year. It is frequently asymptomatic and for many patients, usually goes away on its own within two years.

But for some patients, HPV can cause genital warts or several different types of cancer because it may linger in the body for years before developing symptoms. HPV vaccines, which protect patients from infection by several strains of the virus, are recommended for males and females age 9-26.

## Chlamydia and Gonorrhea

Mirroring national infection rates, two of the most common STIs in Snohomish County are chlamydia and gonorrhea. Both of these are bacterial infections that can be cured with antibiotics, but often go untreated because they don't always produce symptoms (so individuals may not know they're infected). That's why it's important to get tested if you're sexually active.

Chlamydia can cause serious health problems, particularly in women, including ectopic pregnancies and infertility. Although it can be cured with medical treatment, medication cannot reverse the damage already caused by chlamydia.

Gonorrhea affects mucous membranes and can cause permanent health problems in both women and men, ranging from chronic pelvic pain to infertility, and development of disseminated gonococcal infection, a potentially fatal blood infection.

## Syphilis

At the turn of the century, with infection rates at their lowest in history, the bacterial STI syphilis seemed on the verge of being eliminated from the United States.

But infections have been increasing everywhere in the world ever since, with a remarkable jump during the pandemic – nationally, syphilis infections increased by nearly a third. In Snohomish County, there were 94 cases of syphilis in 2022, compared to only 46 in 2019.

Multiple cases of infants born with syphilis transmitted from the mother (congenital syphilis) were reported in the past two years in Snohomish County, after having zero cases from 2015 – 2020.

Although these numbers are quite low compared to other STIs, syphilis is a very serious infection. Babies born with syphilis can develop cataracts, deafness, or seizures, and may even die within a few weeks without treatment.

In adults, syphilis progresses in four stages, each with different symptoms. Although a person can live with an asymptomatic infection for years, without treatment, syphilis can eventually spread to the brain and other major organs, affecting their function and eventually causing death.

Fortunately, syphilis infection is treatable with antibiotics. But as with other STIs, the damage caused before receiving treatment is not reversible.

## **Herpes**

There are two types of herpes virus that can cause painful blisters: herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) and herpes simplex virus type 2 (HSV-2). Although both types can cause genital herpes, type 1 herpes is most commonly associated with oral blisters, commonly called cold sores or fever blisters. Herpes type 2 is most commonly associated with genital blisters.

Herpes is highly contagious and very common. More than half of American adults have oral herpes, and one in six people age 14-49 are affected by genital herpes.

Both types of herpes are most commonly spread through contact with sores on another person. However, it is also possible to catch herpes from skin-to-skin or body fluid contact with an infected person who doesn't currently have any sores.

There is no cure for herpes, but antiviral medications can minimize or prevent flare ups.

## **Hepatitis A and B**

Hepatitis A and hepatitis B are both viral liver infections that are relatively uncommon in the United States. Like many other STIs, hepatitis strains can be asymptomatic and may clear up on their own.

However, hepatitis can cause symptoms in patients that include fever, fatigue, vomiting, joint pain, and jaundice. Hepatitis B may become chronic and is potentially life-threatening when it does.

# Symptoms of an STI

There are a lot of different types of STIs, and their symptoms vary widely. In many cases, an individual may have no symptoms at all. When symptoms do show up, they can be specific to certain STIs, which can help in getting an accurate diagnosis.

But there are many symptoms that are common to different STIs. These include:

- sores, rashes or lesions in the genital area
- pain during sex or urination
- bleeding or discharge from genitals
- swollen lymph nodes
- fever, and
- abdominal pain

Early detection and treatment is the key to staying healthy.

## Diagnosis of an STI or STD

Individuals with an STI who have no symptoms can still pass the infection on to their sexual partners. Although asymptomatic, they can also experience long-term health problems from the STI if it's not treated.

Because individuals may have no visible sign of infection, or only generic symptoms that could be associated with many different ailments, getting screened or tested for STIs is critical to receiving an accurate diagnosis.

Any person who is experiencing the symptoms mentioned above, or who have any of the elevated risk factors such as having multiple partners or unprotected sex, should contact their health care provider to ask about STI screening.

It is important for anyone who is sexually active – single or partnered as well as married folks – to follow CDC guidelines on who should get tested and for what, even if they do not have any symptoms of an infection.

# How to Prevent the Spread of STIs

Vaccinations are available to prevent HPV, hepatitis A, and hepatitis B. If you haven't received these vaccinations, contact your healthcare provider to find out if getting tested for an STI is appropriate for you.

Besides abstinence, practicing safer sex is the best way to avoid sexually transmitted infections. You can help prevent the spread of STIs through these methods:

- Get tested if you are sexually active, particularly if you are or may become pregnant, if you have multiple sexual partners, or don't know your partners' sexual health history.
- Talk to your partner(s) about your and their sexual health history.
- Learn how to use condoms and other barriers effectively, and then do so every time you have sex. Other birth control methods may help prevent pregnancy, but they do not help protect against STIs.
- If you do have a positive STI screening, follow through with treatment to prevent long-term health complications.

## STI Treatments

STI treatment varies depending on the nature of the infection. The bacterial STIs chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis, as well as parasitic trichomoniasis are often curable with a single-dose antibiotic (although antibiotic resistant strains are becoming more common).

Other infections, such as Hepatitis B, herpes simplex virus, HIV, and HPV are incurable, but can be managed with medication.

If you're diagnosed with chlamydia or gonorrhea, Expedited Partner Therapy (EPT) allows your doctor to treat your sex partners without requiring them to be tested or even seen by health care providers. EPT is available at no cost from the Snohomish County Health Department. Please call 425-339-5261 if you or a partner have tested positive for chlamydia and/or gonorrhea and would like EPT.

In all cases, STIs should be treated under the supervision of a healthcare provider. Self-treatment, whether through home remedies or medication purchased online, is not reliable and can even be dangerous.

WWMG Family Medicine providers can answer questions about STIs without judgment and help patients understand how to protect themselves from getting infected. If you think you might have an STI, our compassionate providers offer testing, diagnosis, and treatment options to support your long-term health.

Request an appointment with a WWMG Family Medicine provider today.

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