



Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Introduction

Welcome to the Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) session of the *Living in Balance* program. This session focuses on identifying, preventing, and treating STDs. The session will review the different types of STDs, how they are transmitted, their symptoms, and medical treatments. The session will also review ways to reduce the risk of getting STDs by using safer sex practices.

What is in this session?

This session has two major parts: (1) What Are Sexually Transmitted Diseases? and (2) Lowering the Risk of Infection.

- ✓ After participating in part 1, you will be able to
 - Understand what STDs are and how they are transmitted
 - Recognize the symptoms of different types of STDs
 - Understand the basic treatments available for different STDs
- ✓ After participating in part 2, you will be able to
 - Understand how to lower your risk of getting an STD
 - Understand safer sexual practices



**SESSION 15 HAS
TWO MAJOR PARTS:**

1. What Are Sexually Transmitted Diseases?
2. Lowering the Risk of Infection


**LEARNER OBJECTIVES
FOR PART 1:**

You will

- Understand what STDs are and how they are transmitted
- Recognize the symptoms of different types of STDs
- Understand the basic treatments available for different STDs

**STDs are infections
that are spread from
person to person
through sexual contact.**

What will be asked of you?

You will be asked to look at your sexual behavior and consider your risk for STDs. You will also be asked to look at different types of STDs and the ways in which you can be at risk of contracting them. When you were using alcohol and other drugs, you may have engaged in behaviors that put you at high risk for contracting an STD. Now, in sobriety, you can adopt new behaviors that will lessen your chance of getting such a disease or spreading it to others.


Part 1: What Are Sexually Transmitted Diseases?

STDs are infections that are spread from person to person through sexual contact. Bacteria and viruses that are passed through body fluids such as blood, semen, urine, and vaginal secretions cause STDs.

There are more than twenty-five different types of STDs. Most can be cured if treated early. If not treated early, some STDs can cause severe and permanent damage, such as blindness, sterility, heart disease, or even death. Perhaps the best-known STD, AIDS, has no known cure and can be fatal. It is discussed separately in a different *Living in Balance* session.

Even though there are different types of STDs, they share certain characteristics:

1. Most can be cured, if treated early.
2. If left untreated, some can lead to severe and permanent damage, such as blindness, sterility, and heart disease, and some can kill you.
3. Often, people can have an STD but not experience symptoms. Nevertheless, anyone exposed to the STD can develop complications later in life.
4. When people have an STD and don't have symptoms, they are still contagious and can transmit the infection to other sexual partners.

5. STDs can be transmitted from a pregnant woman to her fetus, which can result in many serious medical problems, including the death of the fetus.

Individuals who have abused alcohol and other drugs over a long period of time may have hurt their immune systems, making it easier for diseases to affect them. People who abuse alcohol and other drugs are also more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors (such as unprotected sex) that also increase their chances of getting an STD.



EXERCISE 1

Please check true or false for the following statements:

1. Most STDs can be cured if treated in time.
 True False

2. If you abuse alcohol and other drugs, you are more likely to contract an STD.
 True False

3. If you don't show any symptoms of an STD, then you don't have one.
 True False

Individuals who have abused alcohol and other drugs over a long period of time may have hurt their immune systems, making it easier for diseases to affect them.




**DEFINITION OF
CHLAMYDIA:**

The most frequently reported infectious disease in the United States—about three million cases occur annually.

Specific STDs

Chlamydia (klah-MID-ee-ah) is the most frequently reported infectious disease in the United States—about three million cases occur annually. It is most prevalent among young women who have sex with a number of different partners. If not properly treated, chlamydia can cause other diseases and may result in sterility. It also may cause painful infections, arthritis, and ectopic (or tubal) pregnancies (a major cause of death for pregnant women).

Symptoms: Appearing one to three weeks after infection, symptoms for women include discharge from the vagina, bleeding between menstrual periods, burning or pain during urination, and pain in the abdomen or belly. Men experience a watery, white discharge from the penis and pain or a burning feeling while urinating. Approximately 75 percent of women and 50 percent of men who have chlamydia show no symptoms.

Treatment: Antibiotics.

General Symptoms of Sexually Transmitted Diseases
Both Men and Women

- Sores, bumps, or blisters on or near the penis, vagina, rectum, or mouth
- Burning or pain during urination
- Fever, chills, and aches
- Swelling or redness in the throat
- Swelling around the vagina or penis

Women Only

- Unusual discharge from the vagina
- Unusual smell from the vagina
- Pain in the pelvic area
- Pain deep inside the vagina during sex
- Vaginal bleeding, not during a menstrual period
- Burning or itching around the vagina

Men Only

- A drip or discharge from the penis

Gardnerella (GARD-ner-el-ah) is a form of *vaginitis* (inflammation of the vagina) caused by bacteria that can be sexually transmitted to male partners. It is possible for an infected man to reinfect his partner.

Symptoms: Since this disease doesn't develop in a set period of time, it is possible to have it for a while before symptoms begin to show. Symptoms include a thick, grayish vaginal discharge that has a fishy odor and an irritation or itch in the pelvic area.

Treatment: Antibiotics used in combination with sulfa creams or suppositories can cure the disease. A woman's sexual partner should wear a condom to protect them both from reinfection until the treatment is complete. The use of alcohol can reduce the effectiveness of the treatment.

Genital/anal warts affect about 15 percent of the American population. They are caused by a virus known as *papilloma*, and they are similar to the common skin wart. If not treated, genital warts will grow and become more difficult to treat.

Symptoms: Small, bumpy warts appear on the sex organs and anus one to six months after initial contact, causing itching or burning. The cauliflowerlike warts are white or gray in color and appear in clusters. For men, the warts generally appear on the penis but may also infect the urethra and bladder. Women can find the warts on the outer genitals or on the cervix. Warts may also develop on the anus or the esophagus.

Treatment: Since the skin cells that contain the virus must be removed, the most common treatment is a mild acid applied by a doctor and rinsed with soap and water four hours later. This may require several treatments over a period of months. Another treatment is to freeze the warts by applying a few drops of liquid nitrogen, after which they will die and fall off. In some situations, large warts are surgically removed.



**DEFINITION OF
GARDNERELLA:**

A form of *vaginitis* (inflammation of the vagina) caused by bacteria.


**DEFINITION OF
GONORRHEA:**

Caused by *bacterium gonococcus*, which requires warmth and moisture in order to survive.



**Treatment of herpes
generally involves
antiviral medications.**

Gonorrhea (GON-oh-REE-ah) is caused by *bacterium gonococcus*, which requires warmth and moisture in order to survive. It prefers to live in the soft, wet mucous membranes that line the openings of the body, such as the mouth, the throat, the vagina, the cervix, the urethra, and the rectum. Since these bacteria cannot survive outside of the human body, gonorrhea cannot be transmitted from surfaces such as toilet seats, doorknobs, or drinking fountains. In men who do not receive treatment for gonorrhea, the infection can spread to the prostate, resulting in sterility or other serious health problems. For women, the infection can spread to the cervix, uterus, and fallopian tubes, and it can result in sterility. Each year, nearly three quarters of a million people in the United States get this disease.

Symptoms: Men may experience a drip or pus discharge from the penis, a burning sensation while urinating, blood or pus in the urine, irritation or swelling of the penis, and/or pain in the penis or groin. Twenty percent of infected men have no symptoms. Women experience symptoms such as a discharge from the cervix, a burning sensation while urinating, a mushroomlike odor in the genital area, and back pain or pain in the lower abdomen. Seventy percent of women with gonorrhea do not notice any symptoms. Symptoms usually appear within three to five days. However, in some cases, gonorrhea may not produce symptoms for thirty days.

Treatment: Antibiotics such as amoxicillin, ampicillin, tetracycline, or erythromycin.

Herpes (HERP-eez) affects approximately forty-five million people in the United States, most of whom are between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five years old. Since herpes is caused by a virus that uses the genetic code of human cells to reproduce, any treatment that would kill the infected cells would also destroy healthy cells. Therefore, there is no cure for herpes at the current time.

There are two kinds of herpes: *genital herpes*, which is spread during vaginal, oral, and anal sex with someone who has herpes, and *oral herpes* (cold sores or fever blisters). Individuals with oral herpes who engage in oral sex can infect the genitals of their

partners and become reinfected by their partners later. Although herpes is usually transmitted during the active stage when sores are present, it can be transmitted at any time.

Herpes can spread from the initial infection site to other body parts through direct contact. In particular, the eyes are vulnerable to serious infection, which may result in blindness. Babies born to women who are having an outbreak at the time of delivery have a 25 to 40 percent chance of becoming infected, and almost 60 percent of infected babies die. To protect the infant, a Caesarean section is usually performed. In addition, there is evidence that women with genital herpes are eight times more likely to develop cervical cancer.

Symptoms: The average period of onset is six days, but it can take from two to thirty days. Symptoms resemble those of the flu and include body aches, nausea, fever, chills, and fatigue, followed by an outbreak of red bumps that turn to blisters that are white on top. These blisters, which last one to three weeks, break and form open sores. Even though the blisters may disappear, the infected person will still have herpes. The person may also notice a burning, “pins and needles” sensation on the skin where the virus entered.

Treatment: Antiviral medications lessen the severity of the first outbreak and may reduce the frequency and length of future outbreaks. However, as stated earlier, there is no cure for herpes at the current time.

Moniliasis (MO-ni-lye-a-sis), also known as *candida*, is a common vaginal yeast infection that is especially frequent in women who are pregnant, diabetic, on antibiotics, or taking birth-control pills. Caused by a fungus, the infection begins when a condition, such as pregnancy, diabetes, poor diet, stress, or excessive douching, causes the fungus to grow.

Symptoms: Women experience symptoms of severe itching, redness or soreness, and a white vaginal discharge. Men seldom experience symptoms, although they may develop a rash in the genital area and lesions on the penis.

There are two kinds of herpes: genital herpes, which is spread during vaginal, oral, and anal sex with someone who has herpes, and oral herpes (cold sores or fever blisters).



DEFINITION OF MONILIASIS:

Also known as *candida*, a common vaginal yeast infection.



**DEFINITION OF
NONGONOCOCCAL,
OR NONSPECIFIC,
URETHRITIS:**

Infections of the urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder. If left untreated, it can lead to sterility.



**DEFINITION OF
SYPHILIS:**

Caused by a bacterium known as a *spirochete*.

Treatment: Medicated vaginal suppositories and creams, such as Mycostatin, are available over the counter to treat the condition.

Nongonococcal (NGU), or nonspecific (NSU), urethritis (you-reeth-RIGHT-us) is an infection of the urethra, the tube that carries urine from the bladder. If left untreated, NGU/NSU can lead to sterility.

Symptoms: Men experience a yellow or white drip from the penis and a burning feeling or pain when urinating, while women experience a discharge or burning during urination, abdominal pain, bleeding between periods, and a low-grade fever. Symptoms develop within one to three weeks.

Treatment: Antibiotics such as azithromycin or erythromycin are used to treat the infection.

Syphilis (SIF-i-liss) is caused by a bacterium known as a *spirochete*. Although syphilis is usually sexually transmitted, this bacterium can enter the body through a break in the skin or a cold sore on the mouth.

Symptoms: It takes from ten days to three months for symptoms to develop, with an average incubation period of twenty-one days. Symptoms occur in four stages, each one more severe than the one before:

1. *Primary syphilis* is characterized by a hard, raised, painless sore called a chancre (pronounced shang-ker), which appears on the penis or on the cervix (where it is difficult to see and feel, and easy to miss). The chancres are accompanied by swollen lymph nodes. If untreated, the chancre will eventually go away and the disease will enter the second stage.
2. *Secondary syphilis* develops within ten weeks after the primary stage and is characterized by an itchless, painless skin rash that develops on the palms, soles of the feet, chest, back, or other part of the body. The rash disappears within two to six weeks and leads to the third stage.

3. *Latent syphilis* has two phases. The first phase lasts approximately four years, but the infected person is only contagious during the first year of latent syphilis. There are no symptoms during this period. In the second phase, the disease may resurface, producing rashes that come and go for up to two years. Although more than half of the people with untreated syphilis remain in the latent stage until they die of old age or other causes, one-third of those with untreated syphilis die of the disease itself.
4. *Late syphilis* is the final stage, during which the spirochetes become killers. Although ulcers that formed on the internal organs can be healed with treatment during this last stage, the damage to the organs can't be repaired. At this stage, the disease can damage the brain, resulting in insanity or death.

Treatment: Antibiotics such as benzathine, penicillin, or tetracycline are used to treat the disease. Syphilis can be cured at any stage, although damage to internal organs cannot be repaired.

Trichomoniasis (TRIK-uh-moe-NYE-uh-sis) is a common vaginal infection caused by a one-celled organism called a *trichomonad*. Often called “trich” (trick), it is usually sexually transmitted, although it can also be transmitted via infected, moist materials, such as wet bathing suits, washcloths, or towels. Long-term effects of this infection are not known.

Symptoms: Symptoms for women include itching and burning in the vaginal area; pain during intercourse; redness or red marks on the vaginal walls; and a smelly, yellow-green discharge. It can infect the bladder or urinary tract. Only 1 percent of infected men will experience symptoms, but if they have been exposed to the disease, they can suffer problems with their prostate, bladder, and urethra. Symptoms will develop in four to twenty-eight days.

Treatment: A prescription drug called Flagyl is used to treat the condition. Note that when taking Flagyl, alcohol is prohibited since the combination of the two can be fatal.



DEFINITION OF TRICHOMONIASIS:

A common vaginal infection caused by a one-celled organism called a *trichomonad*. Often called “trich” (trick), it is usually sexually transmitted.



EXERCISE 2

Please check true or false for the following statements:

1. All STDs can be treated with antibiotics.
 True False

2. Herpes can be spread from the genitals to other parts of the body, including the eyes.
 True False

3. Some medications used for STDs should not be taken with alcohol.
 True False

4. Genital warts can be removed in the same way as other warts (by using liquid nitrogen or acid).
 True False



Part 2: Lowering the Risk of Infection

STDs are spread during sexual contact, whether vaginal, oral, or anal. People who are infected can spread the disease to their sexual partners, often without realizing it. With very simple changes in sexual practices, however, the risk of getting an STD is greatly decreased.

One important way to limit exposure to STDs is to limit the number of sexual partners. The more sexual partners a person has, the higher the risk for becoming infected.

Obviously, people who do not have sexual contact have little or no risk for becoming infected. For people who have regular sexual contact, the safest thing is to limit sexual contact to one partner who is free of infection. If both partners only have sex with each other, and both are free of infection, there is no risk of getting an STD. However, if one of the partners is having sex outside of that relationship, both partners are at risk for infection.



LEARNER OBJECTIVES FOR PART 2:

You will

- Understand how to lower your risk of getting an STD
- Understand safer sexual practices

Safer Sex Guidelines

Safe or Very Low Risk

- Sexual fantasies
- Sex talk
- Flirting
- Hugging
- Social (dry) kissing
- Bathing together
- Body massage
- Smelling bodies and body fluids
- Body licking
- Masturbation
- Using personal sex toys (but do not share them)

Probably Safe, Possibly Risky

- French kissing
- Oral sex on a man without ejaculation (safer with a condom)
- Oral-vaginal sex (safer with a latex barrier and/or spermicide)
- Heterosexual intercourse with condom (safer with spermicide, safer yet when combined with a cervical barrier, such as a diaphragm, cap, or sponge)
- Hand-anal sex with glove
- Anal intercourse with condom (safer to withdraw before ejaculation)
- Anal-oral sex with condom
- Contact with urine

Unsafe

- Vaginal intercourse without a condom
- Anal intercourse without a condom
- Swallowing semen
- Unprotected oral-anal, hand-anal, or manual-vaginal intercourse
- Sharing menstrual blood
- Sharing needles, cooker, cotton, rinse water, or blood



One important way to limit exposure to STDs is to limit the number of sexual partners.



EXERCISE 3

Please answer the following question:

What are some of the things you can do to decrease the risk of getting an STD?

Safer Sex

The basic elements of safer sex are the use of condoms, dental dams, and proper lubricants. Other forms of birth control will not stop the spread of STDs.

Condoms and dental dams provide a physical barrier between the bacteria or virus and the body. Dental dams are flat squares of latex rubber designed for oral sex. Condoms should be used for vaginal, anal, and some types of oral sex. A female condom has also been developed; this is a loose-fitting plastic bag made of polyurethane (not latex) that lines the vagina. Two plastic rings at either end hold it in place.

One type of condom to avoid is the animal-skin condom, which has pores that allow certain viruses (such as the AIDS virus) to pass through. The pores are small enough for semen to be blocked, so they are effective as birth control. But viruses are much smaller than semen, and they can slip through the animal-skin condoms. The type of condom to use is the latex condom. These condoms are able to stop bacteria and viruses, including the AIDS virus.

The best way to ruin a condom is to use an oil-based or petroleum lubricant, such as petroleum jelly. Never use a petroleum lubricant with a condom. Always use a water-based lubricant. Also, never reuse a condom, and be careful not to damage it with sharp objects or teeth.

While the spermicide nonoxynol-9 was once believed to prevent the spread of certain kinds of STDs, more recent studies show that it doesn't really do so. In fact, nonoxynol-9 can irritate the vagina or rectum and increase the chance of getting the HIV virus. While it may be useful for birth control, it should not be used for anal intercourse at all.



EXERCISE 4

Please check the answer that seems most true:

1. You should always use condoms that are made out of
 - Vinyl
 - Latex
 - Animal skin
 - Cellophane
2. Which form of birth control also prevents the spread of STDs?
 - Condoms
 - Birth-control pills
 - Spermicides
 - None of the above



Sexually active adults who are not in a monogamous relationship should get a medical checkup every six months.

Checkups

Because everyone who has an STD may not have symptoms of the disease, STDs can sometimes go undetected. Sexually active adults who are not in a monogamous relationship should get a medical checkup every six months, even if there are no symptoms of STDs.

For women, some STDs can be especially dangerous and damage the female sex organs. A woman may not begin experiencing symptoms until serious damage has occurred. An untreated STD can cause permanent damage to the sex organs, which may result in ectopic pregnancies, miscarriages, and infertility. In addition, an infected mother can give her baby an STD during birth. If the baby is exposed to the STD, it can suffer permanent damage, or even die. Fortunately, precautions can be taken if the STD is detected before birth.



EXERCISE 5

Please answer the following questions:

Do you get regular checkups? Does your doctor check for STDs? Explain.



Session 15 Summary

In this session you have learned important information about STDs, including how to identify them and how they are commonly treated. You have also examined the ways in which you can reduce your risk of contracting an STD or of spreading an STD you have to others. All of this information will help you have a healthier recovery.



Session 15 Glossary

Chlamydia (klah-MID-ee-ah) is most prevalent among young women who have multiple sexual partners and is characterized by pain and discharge. It can be cured with antibiotics.

Condoms provide a physical barrier between the bacteria or virus and the body, and they should be used for vaginal, anal, and oral sex.

Gardnerella (GARD-ner-el-ah) is a form of vaginitis (inflammation of the vagina) caused by bacteria, which can be sexually transmitted to male partners. It is cured with antibiotics in combination with sulfa creams or suppositories. The woman's sexual partner should wear a condom to protect them both from reinfection until treatment is complete. Use of alcohol can reduce the effectiveness of the treatment.

Genital/anal warts are caused by a virus known as *papilloma*, which is similar to the common skin wart. A doctor using a mild acid or liquid nitrogen can remove them.

Gonorrhea (GON-oh-REE-ah), caused by *bacterium gonococcus*, lives in the mucous membranes that line the openings of the body and can spread to sexual organs. It can be cured with antibiotics.

Herpes (HERP-eez) can be oral or genital, and is characterized by cold sores or fever blisters that can spread from the initial infection site to other body parts through direct contact. Although herpes is usually transmitted during the active stage when sores are present, it can be transmitted at any time. Treatment includes a prescription ointment, acyclovir, to lessen the severity of the first outbreak. There is no cure for herpes at the current time.

Moniliasis (MO-ni-lye-a-sis) is a common vaginal yeast infection that is cured using medicated vaginal suppositories and creams, such as Mycostatin, that are available over the counter.

Nongonococcal (NGU), or nonspecific (NSU), urethritis (you-reeth-RIGHT-us) is an infection of the urethra and is cured using antibiotics.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are a wide variety of infections caused by bacteria and viruses that are spread from person to person through sexual contact and contact with body fluids, such as blood, semen, urine, and vaginal secretions.

Syphilis (SIF-i-liss) is caused by a type of bacteria that can enter the body through a break in the skin or a cold sore in the mouth. It is characterized by the presence of chancre sores and skin rashes, and it can be fatal. Treated with antibiotics, syphilis can be cured at any stage, although damage to internal organs cannot be repaired.

Trichomoniasis (TRIK-uh-moe-NYE-uh-sis), often called “trich,” is a common vaginal infection. It can be transmitted via infected, moist materials, such as wet bathing suits, washcloths, or towels. Long-term effects of this infection are not known. Treatment includes a prescription drug called Flagyl, which should not be used with alcohol.