

STI/Condom week

STI/Condom Week is a health awareness event held between the 9th and 15th of February each year to highlight the importance of condom usage and inform people about the transmission of sexually transmitted infections.



A sexually transmitted infection, or STI, is a disease (bacteria, virus, or parasite) that is usually passed from one person to another through sexual activity. This does not necessarily have to include penetration, as some STIs are passed from skin to skin contact.

How else can STIs be transmitted?

STIs can also be transmitted from mother to child during birth, blood transfusions, and from sharing needles in hypodermic syringes. STIs are a major health concern in South Africa, and over four million people receive treatment for STIs every year. However, many people are embarrassed by their conditions and do not report them to the doctor as they should.

The different types of STIs

- **Chlamydia** – Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STI. Chlamydia can cause an infection with no symptoms in men, but often leads to severe infection in women. Left untreated, chlamydia can lead to infertility in women.
- **Genital warts** – Genital warts appear as little bumps or growths in the genital and/or anal area of your body. They are relatively easy to treat with various topical creams and a type of treatment called cryotherapy, which freezes the warts off.

- **Genital herpes** – This is one of the most common STIs in South Africa. Herpes sufferers experience bursts of painful sores or blisters in the genital area from time to time. Many people do not realise just how serious herpes is. It is the leading cause of genital ulcer disease worldwide and also increases the risk of HIV transmission.

- **Gonorrhoea** – Gonorrhoea is a bacterial infection. Symptoms of this STI include unusual discharge and painful urination. It is easy to diagnose and treat. However, if left untreated it can cause serious health problems and even infertility.

- **Syphilis** – Syphilis is one of the more complex STIs in terms of symptoms as it initially appears as a painless sore on the genital or around the mouth, which typically lasts for two to six weeks. It then causes an erratic skin rash and sore throat. It is fairly easy to treat, but can be extremely dangerous if left untreated. Long-term effects of syphilis include blindness, paralysis, stroke, and even death.

- **HIV** – HIV is one of the more commonly known STIs and one of the most dangerous. HIV wears down your immune system so that your body is unable to fight against other infections. While there is no cure for HIV, it can be successfully treated, enabling those who are HIV-positive to live long and fulfilling lives.



How do I know if I have an STI?

The symptoms of an STI vary depending on the infection that has been contracted. Certain STIs may not even cause any symptoms at all, making it difficult for the sufferer to know that they have one. However, there are a number of symptoms that may point to an STI, including:

- Pain during urination.
- Sores and/or bumps in the oral, genital, or rectal areas.
- Unusual vaginal discharge or bleeding.
- Sore or swollen lymph nodes, or glands, in the groin area and sometimes elsewhere in the body.
- Lower abdominal pain.

How can you protect yourself?

You can reduce your chances of exposure to STIs in several ways:

- Have sex with a partner who has been tested for an STI, and who only has sex with you. The more partners you have, the more likely you are to be exposed to an STI.
- Having sex without a condom is one of the greatest causes of contracting STIs. It is vital that you use a condom at all times when having sexual intercourse.
- Previous infections with one or more STIs make it easier for a new STI to develop in your body. You and your partner can also re-infect one another with an STI if you do not get yourselves tested and treated regularly.
- Always use sterile or new needles, and do not share drug-using equipment.

Most STIs can be cured if diagnosed and treated early. All of them can be prevented, however, through responsible sexual behaviour.

Condoms and STIs

Most experts believe that the risk of getting HIV & AIDS and other STIs can be greatly reduced if a condom is used properly.

Consistent and correct use of male latex condoms can reduce (though not eliminate) the risk of STI transmission, and provide maximum protective support. Inconsistent use can lead to STI acquisition, because transmission can occur with a single act of intercourse with an infected partner. However, there's no absolute guarantee even when you use a condom.