

Eighteen And Under



Sexually Transmitted Infections

STIs are on the increase amongst young people of all sexualities in the UK. Many of these infections can lead to much larger health problems such as infertility or death. Thus it is vital that you are able identify STIs as early as possible. This section describes the most common STIs, their symptoms and their treatment.

[Gonorrhoea](#)

[Chlamydia](#)

[Genital Herpes](#)

[Hepatitis](#)

[Non-specific urethritis \(NSU\)](#)

[Syphilis](#)

[Genital warts](#)

[Pubic lice](#)

[LGV \(lymphogranuloma venereum\)](#)

[HIV](#)

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is an infection caused by bacteria that live in the urethra in men or in the vagina in women, as well as in the throat or the anus and rectum.

Symptoms

In men symptoms of Gonorrhoea can be:

- Drops of white or green liquid on the end of the penis (a discharge)

Eighteen And Under



- Pain when passing urine
- Itching in the anus or rectum.

In women symptoms of Gonorrhoea can be:

- A white or green liquid discharge from the vagina
- Pain when passing urine
- Itching in the anus or rectum.

However, many men or women who have Gonorrhoea do not have any symptoms.

How it is transmitted

You can get Gonorrhoea by having sex with someone who already has it. It is most easily passed on through penetrative vaginal and anal sex without a condom, although it can also be transmitted on fingers from one person's penis or vagina to the other person's.

A pregnant woman who has Gonorrhoea can pass it on to her baby when it is being born.

What can I do if I think I have Gonorrhoea?

If you think you have Gonorrhoea you can go to a NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Eighteen And Under



Testing

The doctor or nurse will test you for Gonorrhoea by taking a small sample with cotton wool or a swab:

- In women swabs are usually taken from the cervix (entrance to the womb) and urethra.
- In men swabs are usually taken from the tip of the penis.
- In both men and women swabs may also be taken from the throat or the rectum.

Having a swab taken is not painful, although it may be uncomfortable. The samples are then tested for Gonorrhoea.

Treatment

It is usually easy to get rid of Gonorrhoea with antibiotics. Your doctor may ask you to return later to check that the Gonorrhoea has gone.

Why get treated?

It is important to get rid of Gonorrhoea because if it stays in your body it can lead to serious health problems, including:

- Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women, where the fallopian tubes are infected, become inflamed and can cause infertility (stopping a woman from being able to have children)
- Inflammation of the testicles in men, which can cause infertility (stopping a man from being able to have children).

Protect yourself and others

Eighteen And Under



If you have Gonorrhoea it is best to tell your boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone else you have had sex with recently so that they can get a check-up. Remember that until the Gonorrhoea is treated, and you have taken all the antibiotics, you can still pass it on to anyone you have sex with.

Using a condom can help protect against getting Gonorrhoea. Remember too that using a condom will help protect you against getting or passing on other sexually transmitted infections.

[Back to top](#)

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is a common infection caused by bacteria and is easy to pass on. The bacteria live in the urethra in men or in the vagina in women, as well as in the throat or rectum.

Symptoms

In men symptoms of Chlamydia can be:

- Drops of white liquid on the end of the penis (a discharge)
- Pain when passing urine.

In women symptoms of Chlamydia can be:

- A white liquid discharge from the vagina
- Pain when passing urine
- Pain in the lower abdomen
- Pain during sex.

Eighteen And Under



However, most men or women who have Chlamydia do not have any symptoms.

How it is transmitted

You can get Chlamydia by having sex with someone who already has it. Chlamydia is most easily passed on through penetrative anal and vaginal sex without a condom, although it can also be transmitted on fingers from one person's penis or vagina to another.

A pregnant woman who has Chlamydia can pass it on to her baby when it is being born.

What can I do if I think I have Chlamydia?

If you think you have Chlamydia you can go to a NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Testing

The doctor or nurse will test you for Chlamydia by taking a small sample with cotton wool or a swab:

- In women swabs are usually taken from the cervix (entrance to the womb) and urethra.
- In men swabs are usually taken from the tip of the penis.

Eighteen And Under



Having a swab taken is not painful although it may be uncomfortable. The samples are then tested for Chlamydia.

Treatment

It is usually easy to get rid of Chlamydia with a course of antibiotics, but you have to take all the tablets you are given to kill the infection. Once you have taken the tablets the doctor will ask you to return to check that the Chlamydia has gone.

Why get treated?

It is important to get rid of Chlamydia because if it stays in your body it can lead to serious health problems, including:

- Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) in women, where the fallopian tubes are infected, become inflamed and can cause infertility (stopping a woman from being able to have children)
- Ectopic pregnancies (pregnancy outside the womb) in women if they have Chlamydia when they are pregnant
- Inflammation of the testicles in men which can cause infertility (stopping a man from being able to have children).

Protect yourself and others

If you have Chlamydia it is best to tell your boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone else you have had sex with recently so that they can get a check-up. Remember that until the Chlamydia is treated, and you have taken all the antibiotics, you can still pass it on to anyone you have sex with.

Eighteen And Under



Using a condom can help protect against getting Chlamydia. Remember too that using a condom will help protect you against getting or passing on other sexually transmitted infections.

[Back to top](#)

Genital Herpes

Genital Herpes is a very common infection caused by a virus called the Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). This virus is similar to the one that causes cold sores around the mouth.

Most people who have HSV do not have any symptoms, or do not recognise the symptoms because they are so mild. Therefore many people who have HSV do not know that they have it.

Symptoms

Symptoms of Herpes, which you can get anything from a week to a few years after getting the virus, can be:

- Feeling achy and hot, as if you have a cold or the flu
- Small blisters or sores, often around the penis or vagina, which can be painful and can make it hurt when passing urine.

If someone has Herpes they can get symptoms or outbreaks a number of times. Usually people feel most unwell during the first outbreak.

Many people only ever have one outbreak: after that their bodies stop future outbreaks happening.

Eighteen And Under



How it is transmitted

HSV is transmitted through skin-to-skin contact, so sex, particularly penetrative vaginal and anal sex, is the main way that it is passed on. It can also be transmitted through other forms of sex such as oral sex.

What can I do if I think I have Genital Herpes?

If you think you have HSV you can go to a NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Testing

The doctor or nurse will test you for HSV by taking a small sample with cotton wool or a swab. They can only test for HSV when there is a sore present to swab. Having a swab taken is not painful. The samples are then tested for HSV.

Treatment

There is no treatment that will get rid of HSV from your body. If you have a particularly severe outbreak of Herpes you may be given tablets, which can help it to clear up quicker. However, rest and looking after yourself is probably the best way to help yourself get better.

Some people find that they get outbreaks when they:

- Are tired or stressed

Eighteen And Under



- Have not been eating well
- Have been drinking a lot or not taking as much care of themselves as usual.

Many people who have Herpes feel they can lessen the chances of getting an outbreak by avoiding or reducing the things that may bring it on.

Protect yourself and others

If you have HSV it is best to tell your boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone else you have had sex with recently so that they can get a check-up.

Using a condom can help protect against getting HSV. Remember too that using a condom will help protect you against getting or passing on other sexually transmitted infections.

[Back to top](#)

Hepatitis

Hepatitis means 'liver inflammation'. It is caused by a virus. Several kinds of hepatitis virus can infect the liver, but the most common are the hepatitis A, B and C viruses.

Types of Hepatitis

Hepatitis can be categorized as either acute or chronic.

Acute Hepatitis

Acute Hepatitis occurs suddenly or gradually, but in either case it is short-lived, usually lasting less than two months. For someone with acute Hepatitis, liver damage is usually mild.

Eighteen And Under



On rare occasions, acute Hepatitis can be fatal. In some circumstances, acute Hepatitis can progress to chronic Hepatitis.

Chronic Hepatitis

Chronic Hepatitis persists for long periods of time and is classified as either chronic persistent or chronic acute. Chronic persistent Hepatitis is usually mild and progresses slowly. However, it can become more severe, progressing to chronic acute Hepatitis. As liver damage becomes more extensive and severe, chronic acute Hepatitis can cause cirrhosis, most often resulting in liver failure and even death.

Viral causes of Hepatitis

There are seven viruses that are known to cause Hepatitis. These are designated by the letters A to G. However, the cause of some Hepatitis is still unknown, leading scientists to believe there are other viruses that have yet to be discovered.

The three most common viral forms of Hepatitis are:

- Hepatitis A
- Hepatitis B
- Hepatitis C.

The other forms of Hepatitis - D, E, F and G - are very rare.

Hepatitis A

Hepatitis A is the least dangerous form of Hepatitis. It is most common in developing countries.

Eighteen And Under



How it is transmitted

Hepatitis A is caused by the Hepatitis A virus (HAV). If someone is infected with Hepatitis A then this virus is present in their faeces, but not in their blood or saliva.

If you get faeces containing the virus in your mouth, the virus can be passed on to you. It doesn't matter how small that amount is: even tiny amounts of faeces that you can't see can still be enough to pass on the Hepatitis A virus.

Anyone can get infected by handling a condom that has been used for anal sex or by eating food prepared by someone with the virus who hasn't washed their hands after using the toilet.

Symptoms

Hepatitis A can affect people in different ways. Symptoms generally start to appear two to six weeks after you get infected, and can easily be mistaken for the effects of flu. You may suffer from:

- Aches and pains
- Exhaustion
- Fever
- Headaches
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Sickness
- Stomach pain.

You may also get jaundice, which makes the whites of your eyes and skin go yellow, your urine go dark and your faeces turn pale.

Eighteen And Under



Recovery

Almost everyone recovers completely from Hepatitis A and most people feel better after just a few weeks. But you can feel exhausted for months afterwards and may need time off work to recover. People with Hepatitis A are advised to get plenty of rest and to eat well. While you are recovering you should avoid alcohol, recreational drugs, fatty foods and excessive exercise.

It is unlikely that anyone who has had Hepatitis A will suffer any long-term liver damage. However, a very small number of people do develop long-term liver problems.

Prevention

People who recover from Hepatitis A acquire immunity to the virus. As the body can recover by itself from the virus, it usually isn't treated.

If you haven't had Hepatitis A then a vaccine is recommended to prevent infection.

Hepatitis B

The Hepatitis B virus is passed on very easily and is up to 100 times more infectious than HIV.

How it is transmitted

People with the Hepatitis B virus carry it in their body fluids: they have it in their blood and semen, and in their saliva too. If you get any of these get into your body or bloodstream, you can get Hepatitis B.

Most people get infected through oral or penetrative sex, especially if they don't use condoms. Hepatitis B can also be passed on through kissing. If you

Eighteen And Under



inject drugs (including steroids), you are at risk if you share needles and other injecting equipment. Sharing razor blades, sex toys and toothbrushes can also spread the virus, as it can live in dried blood.

A person with Hepatitis B is most infectious before they start to show any symptoms of the virus.

Symptoms

You can start to show symptoms of Hepatitis B about six weeks to six months after getting infected. These symptoms include:

- Aches and pains
- Exhaustion
- Headaches
- Fever
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhoea
- Stomach pain
- Feeling sick.

You may also develop jaundice which makes the whites of your eyes and skin go yellow, your urine go dark and your faeces turn pale.

Hepatitis B can affect people in different ways. Many people don't get any symptoms, but they can still pass on the virus. Others get mild symptoms that they don't recognise as Hepatitis B, while others get seriously ill but gradually recover. About 10% of people who get Hepatitis B develop long-term liver problems, while about 1% die as a result of the illness.

Recovery

Eighteen And Under



After a few weeks of feeling very ill, most people get over Hepatitis B without needing treatment, but you might need several months to get your strength back. You might have to have time off work, get plenty of rest and avoid alcohol and recreational drugs for about a year to let your liver recover.

Once you've recovered from Hepatitis B you'll stop being infectious so you won't be able to give it to other people. And you won't get it again.

Most people recover and suffer no lasting damage. But about 1 in 10 people don't fully recover and they stay infectious. These people have chronic (long-term) hepatitis and are called carriers. Eventually they might suffer from serious liver damage through liver cancer and cirrhosis.

If you have trouble clearing the virus from your body after, say, six months, your doctor might prescribe an anti-viral drug. These often have side effects like severe nausea, headaches and fever.

Prevention

Only vaccination gives real protection against Hepatitis B, although the use of condoms can reduce the risk of transmission during sex. The vaccination is safe, free and involves three injections.

Hepatitis C

Hepatitis C is possibly less easily passed on than Hepatitis A or Hepatitis B, but it can be the most damaging form of the disease.

How it is transmitted

The Hepatitis C virus (HCV) is mainly found in blood, including dried blood, but it can also be present in semen and vaginal fluid therefore, if you get

Eighteen And Under



infected blood, semen or vaginal fluid into your bloodstream, you can get Hepatitis C. Sexual transmission of HCV although not common can and does happen.

Until recently, the virus was not thought to be transmitted through unprotected sex but more people have been becoming infected with the virus during sex. You may also be at risk of getting infected with Hepatitis C if you share needles or straws for inhaling cocaine or other drugs, or sex toys or razors.

Symptoms

Many of the symptoms of Hepatitis C are similar to those of Hepatitis A and B. They can appear from two weeks to six months after you are infected, and are often mistaken for flu. Although some people get no symptoms at all, you may experience:

- Tiredness
- Anxiety
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Alcohol intolerance
- Pain around the liver
- Concentration problems
- Feeling sick
- Other flu-like symptoms such as fever, headaches, chills and night sweats.

You may also develop jaundice which makes the whites of your eyes and skin go yellow, your urine go dark and your faeces turn pale.

Recovery

Eighteen And Under



Hepatitis C is much more serious than some other types of Hepatitis and the body is unlikely to clear it on its own. This means that treatment is often used, but it is not always successful. People with Hepatitis C will need to take care of themselves while they are ill and have regular check-ups with a specialist. They should maintain a balanced, low-fat diet and avoid taking drugs and alcohol.

Most people who get Hepatitis C become carriers. However, chronic infection can result in fatal cirrhosis of the liver or liver cancer.

Prevention

Unfortunately, there is no vaccine against Hepatitis C. You can prevent Hepatitis C from being passed on by using condoms and lubrication when you have anal sex, and not sharing needles, or snorting or pipe equipment.

[Back to top](#)

Non-specific urethritis (NSU)

Non-specific urethritis is the inflammation of a man's urethra. The urethra is the tube down the middle of the penis that carries urine out of the body.

Non-specific urethritis can be caused by:

- A bacteria, the most common one being Chlamydia
- Slight damage to the urethra or the end of the penis
- Chemicals, such as those in soap powder, which may irritate the urethra.

Eighteen And Under



Symptoms

Symptoms of NSU can be:

- Drops of white liquid on the end of the penis (a discharge)
- A burning pain when passing urine and feeling like needing to urinate more than usual.

Most men who have NSU do not get any symptoms.

How it is transmitted

You can get NSU through having sex. It is most easily passed on through penetrative vaginal or anal sex without a condom, although it can also be transmitted on fingers from the vagina to the penis.

What can I do if I think I have NSU?

If you think you have NSU you can go to an NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Testing

The doctor will test you for NSU by taking a small sample with cotton wool or a swab. Swabs are usually taken from the tip of the penis. Having a swab taken is not painful but it may be uncomfortable. The sample will then be tested for NSU.

Eighteen And Under



Treatment

If you have NSU it is usually very easy to get rid of it with a course of antibiotic tablets, but you have to take all the tablets to cure the NSU.

Why get treated?

It is important to get rid of NSU as, in some rare cases, if it is untreated it can lead to other health problems. It can infect the testicles and make it difficult to conceive a baby.

Protect yourself and others

Using a condom can help protect against getting NSU. Remember too that using a condom will help protect you against getting or passing on other sexually transmitted infections.

[Back to top](#)

Syphilis

Syphilis is an infection that is caused by a bacteria. It is most easily passed on through penetrative vaginal and anal sex without a condom.

Symptoms

There are a number of symptoms of Syphilis, which show up at different stages in the infection. The symptoms are the same in men as in women.

Early symptoms

About three weeks after catching Syphilis one or more sores may appear on the body, usually around the penis or vagina. Anytime from a few weeks to a

Eighteen And Under



few months later a rash may appear: these small spots don't itch. At the same time other sores may appear and the person may feel unwell, often as if they have a very bad cold. During this time the person is very infectious.

In these early stages the Syphilis is usually easy to treat.

Later stages

When Syphilis is not treated and it stays in the body people can go on to get much more serious health problems later in life. These can include:

- Heart problems
- Eyesight problems
- Problems with the nervous system.

It is still possible to get rid of the Syphilis during this stage but sometimes the serious problems do not go away.

What can I do if I think I have Syphilis?

If you think you have Syphilis you can go to a NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Testing

The doctor will test you for Syphilis with a simple blood test. If you have a sore on your body they will swab this with a cotton wool stick. They will also

Eighteen And Under



examine you. None of these tests will be painful but some may be uncomfortable. The samples will then be tested for Syphilis.

Treatment

If you have Syphilis it is usually easy to get rid of it with a course of antibiotics, taken as either tablets or injections. But you have to take all the tablets to kill the Syphilis. Once you have taken the antibiotics you will need to return to the doctor to make sure the Syphilis is gone.

Protect yourself and others

You will need to tell your girlfriend or boyfriend, or anyone else you have had sex with, as soon as possible that you have been diagnosed with Syphilis so that they can get checked out too. It is important to get rid of the Syphilis early on as it can lead to serious health problems if left untreated.

Using a condom can help protect against getting Syphilis. Remember too that using a condom will help protect you against getting or passing on other sexually transmitted infections.

[Back to top](#)

Genital warts

Genital warts are small fleshy lumps that can appear around a man's penis and testicles, a woman's vagina or around the anus

Genital warts are caused by a virus called human papilloma virus (HPV). It is one of the most common sexually transmitted infections.

Eighteen And Under



You can have HPV and not get genital warts. There is another type of HPV that causes warts that you might find elsewhere on your body, such as your hand.

Symptoms

Genital warts do not usually hurt, although symptoms can be:

- Itching
- A little bleeding from warts inside the vagina or anus.

How it is transmitted

Genital warts are spread by close skin-to-skin contact. Sex, especially penetrative anal and vaginal sex, is the main way that warts are passed on. If you have sex with someone who has genital warts you may get the virus that causes warts as well.

Warts cannot be caught from toilet seats or swimming pools. Also, as the warts on your hands are a different type to genital warts, they cannot be passed from someone's hand to your genitals.

What can I do if I think I have genital warts?

If you think you have genital warts you can go to a NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Eighteen And Under



Testing

The doctor or nurse can usually tell whether you have warts just by looking. However, they may have to check by putting some drops of liquid onto the lump. This does not hurt at all.

Treatment

Occasionally warts go away by themselves. However, it is best not to rely on this but to get help from a doctor. The doctor may treat them by:

- Painting them with a liquid
- Freezing them with gas (which is a bit like dry ice).

These methods will gradually remove the warts and are not painful.

Sometimes you may have to visit the doctor a number of times over a few months for treatment until the warts have gone.

Why get treated?

Some women who get warts worry that HPV is linked to cancer of the cervix. The most common type of HPV is not linked to cancer, although some of the much rarer types are. Nevertheless, it is important that women over the age of 20 have a regular cervical smear test.

Protect yourself and others

Using a condom can help protect against getting genital warts. Remember also that using a condom will help protect you against getting or passing on other sexually transmitted infections.

[Back to top](#)

Eighteen And Under



Pubic lice

Pubic lice are tiny insects, or parasites, that are about the size of the head of a pin. They are also called "crabs" because of what they look like.

Pubic lice live in pubic hair, which is the hair around the penis and the vagina. They are also sometimes found in other body hair such as on the legs, under arms or on the stomach. They do not live in the hair on your head.

Symptoms

Signs and symptoms of pubic lice can be:

- Itching in the areas where the lice are living
- Black powder, which is their droppings, in your underwear
- Little round spots, which are their eggs, fixed on your hairs.

Some people notice the lice themselves but usually they are too small to see.

How they are passed on

Pubic lice are passed on by close skin-to-skin contact, often during sex, although they can also be passed on by other close contact, such as sharing a bed. You cannot get lice from lavatory seats or by simply sharing a chair with someone.

What can I do if I think I have pubic lice?

If you think you have pubic lice you can go to a NHS sexual health clinic. You can read more about clinics and find your nearest one elsewhere on this website. You can also visit your local or family doctor (GP).

Eighteen And Under



By law sexual health clinics cannot tell anyone about your visit. However, these rules do not apply to your GP who can tell other people that you have had an appointment with them.

Testing

The doctor or nurse can tell whether you have lice just by looking: often they will use a microscope to do this.

Treatment

The doctor will give you some lotion to put on that will get rid of the pubic lice. You can put the lotion on at home and this does not hurt. You will usually have to apply the lotion a few times over a day or so until the lice have gone. The doctor may ask you to return for a check-up to make sure the lice have all been killed.

Sometimes you will still itch for a time after the lice have gone. The doctor can give you a lotion to help stop this.

You should wash the bedclothes you slept in, any towels you have used and any clothes you have worn while you had the lice to make sure you get rid of them.

Inform your partners

If you have pubic lice it is best to tell your boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone else you have had sex with recently, or been in very close contact with, so that they can get a check-up.

[Back to top](#)

Eighteen And Under



LGV (lymphogranuloma venereum)

LGV is a sexually transmitted infection caused by a certain type of Chlamydia bacteria. It's started to spread among gay men so everyone needs to look out for it.

LGV

Lymphogranuloma venereum (LGV) is a sexually transmitted infection not normally seen in the UK. But since 2004 several hundred British gay men have been infected with it.

LGV is caused by a rare type of Chlamydia bacteria and is cured with antibiotics.

How is LGV passed on?

Men with lots of sexual partners are at most risk. Unprotected anal sex and fisting without latex gloves are the main ways the infection is spread. Using sex toys, like dildoes, on more than one person can also spread the bacteria.

Symptoms

There are three stages to LGV, with different symptoms depending on what part of the body is infected.

Stage one

Three days to three weeks after getting infected a small, painless sore might appear in your mouth or anus, or on your penis. Many people don't get a sore or notice one.

Eighteen And Under



Stage two

Ten to 30 days later (or longer) your glands may become painfully swollen and you may feel ill and feverish. If you get infected in the anus you can get painful inflammation, ulcers and discharge there. If the infection is in your penis you may get a discharge and the glands in your groin can swell. An infection in the mouth may cause the glands in your neck or armpit to swell.

Stage three

If it is left untreated for a long time, LGV will cause serious lasting damage to your anus or penis.

Treatment

Three weeks of antibiotics can cure LGV if it is treated before stage three.

Protect yourself and others

You can reduce the risk of getting LGV if you use condoms, and use latex gloves for fisting. If you share sex toys, cover them with a fresh condom for each person they're used with.

If you have any symptoms, especially inflammation of the anus, a check-up at a sexual health (GUM) clinic is strongly advised.

[Back to top](#)

HIV

HIV is not passed on easily from one person to another, especially compared to other viruses. That's because the HIV virus is present in body fluids. So for HIV to be passed on, the body fluids of someone who is already infected

Eighteen And Under



have to get into an uninfected person's body and then into their bloodstream.

Main sources of infection

The body fluids that contain enough HIV to infect someone are:

- Seminal fluid
- Vaginal fluids, including menstrual fluids
- Breast milk
- Blood.

Other body fluids, like saliva, sweat or urine, do not contain enough of the HIV virus to infect another person. So the main ways that HIV can be transmitted are:

- Through sexual intercourse and other sexual activities
- From mother to baby
- From blood to blood.

Ways HIV is not passed on

The most common way to become infected with HIV is through sexual contact. HIV is not passed on through normal social contact, including:

- Through unbroken, healthy skin
- Kissing
- Sharing cups, plates, cutlery or linen, such as towels
- Using the same toilets and swimming pools.

Caring for someone living with HIV or AIDS does not put you at risk, and neither does mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. And you can't breathe it in or get infected by mosquitoes or other animals.

Eighteen And Under



Reduce the risk

It is not the type of person you are, the lifestyle you follow, or where you come from in the world that puts you at risk of getting infected with HIV. It's what you do. By changing what you do you can minimise the risk of getting infected.

What to look out for

Common symptoms of HIV infection include:

- Unintentional weight loss
- Chronic diarrhoea
- Skin rashes, especially on your face, genitals or anus
- An increase in herpes ulcers or thrush infections in your mouth and genitals
- Sweats, especially at night
- Unusual tiredness
- Nausea or loss of appetite
- Swollen lymph glands in the neck, groin or armpits.

These symptoms can all be caused by conditions other than HIV, and do not mean you have AIDS. However, if you experience all or some of these symptoms persistently, it might be a good idea to get an HIV test, especially if you think you may have been at risk of HIV infection.

What is an HIV test?

You can find out if you have become infected with HIV by having a blood test done. The test doesn't look for the virus itself but for antibodies to the virus. Antibodies are made in your blood when an infection has got into your body.

Eighteen And Under



When should I get an HIV test?

It can take up to three months after infection with HIV before the antibodies show up in your blood. These three months are called the window period. A test done before these three months are over isn't reliable because a blood test may find no antibodies and so you will appear free of HIV, even though the reality is that you have been infected (and could pass HIV on to others).

What do the results mean?

If you have a test three months after you've run the risk of getting HIV and no antibodies are found the result is said to be negative and you are almost certain not to have HIV. But if you take risks again you could become get HIV. A negative HIV test doesn't protect you from getting infected in the future.

If antibodies to HIV have been made in your blood then the test result is positive and you have HIV. This means that you could pass it on to others through unprotected sex, giving blood or sharing needles if you inject drugs. If you did any of these during the time between getting HIV and having the test then you may have passed on the virus during that period, and should tell those involved so that they can have an HIV test too.

HIV test results are reliable. To make sure no one is given the wrong result, a positive result is only given after the blood has been tested several times.

Where can I get an HIV test?

HIV tests can be done at the following:

- A genito-urinary medicine (GUM) clinic
- A private clinic
- Your GP (family doctor)

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- A specialist HIV clinic

You can choose where you go, bearing in mind that each option has advantages and disadvantages.

GUM clinics

If you have an HIV test at a GUM clinic your results won't go on your medical record, and you can remain anonymous if you want to. Also, you may not need to make an appointment.

Private clinics

The results of any HIV test done at a private clinic won't go on your medical record either. You'll have to pay for the test but you can make an appointment at a time that suits you and you'll get the results quickly.

Your GP

HIV tests can be done at GP surgeries, which can be an advantage if you know your GP and feel comfortable with them testing you. However, many GPs do not know a lot about HIV and may not be able to answer your questions. And if you are diagnosed with HIV then your GP will not be able to treat you but will refer you to a specialist doctor for treatment.

If you are tested by your GP then your results will go on your medical records and so certain insurance companies and mortgage providers will be able to see them.

Specialist HIV clinic

Eighteen And Under



Often hospitals in larger towns and cities will have a specialist HIV clinic attached to them where people living with HIV go for their medical treatment. You can often get tested for HIV there but unlike a GUM you won't get tested for other sexually transmitted infections. The fact that you've gone for a test won't go on your medical record.

[Back to top](#)