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Gay Men and STDs

New York State Department of Health

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GAY

MEN

and STDs



Have you ever heard the myth that gay men don't get VD? Actually, sexually active gay men are five times more likely to get VD than straights. Why? The parts of the body used during gay sex — such as the mouth and rectum — are more prone to *asymptomatic* (without signs or symptoms) infection. So, a gay man can unknowingly pass VD on to his sex partner without being aware that he has VD himself.

Another myth is that there are only two venereal diseases — syphilis and gonorrhea. In fact, there are many sexually transmitted diseases. And more are becoming apparent every year. That's why the medical profession now refers to VD as STDs — sexually transmitted diseases. And they *are* transmitted sexually, not through contact with toilets or other objects.

STDs and gays -

Certain STDs are causing more problems for gays than for straights, because oral-anal and oral-genital sex are more common among gays. Since many sexually transmitted diseases can have devastating effects on health, it's very important that all gay men be on guard against them. So if you're gay, read on . . . for your own sake and for your partner's sake.

This pamphlet will discuss the warning signs of some of these diseases. If you learn them, you'll know when to seek treatment. Or better yet, have yourself checked out routinely every three to six months . . . because often there are no warning signs — and you can't tell by looking at someone whether he has an STD.

This pamphlet was prepared by the Office of Health Promotion of the New York State Health Department with the help of the Gay Men's Health Project, 74 Grove Street, New York, NY 10014.



Level with your doctor -

It's very important that you tell the doctor about your sexual habits. If symptoms appear, the first signs of an STD usually are wherever sexual contact was made. In gay men, that means the signs are often hidden in the rectum or the mouth or throat. These parts of your body are not routinely checked unless the doctor has been alerted.

Getting help -

Every major city in New York State has free, confidential public health clinics, staffed by professional people who don't care about your sexual preferences. They just want you and your partners to stay healthy.

Some cities have clinics just for gay men. And some private physicians are especially sensitive. If you don't feel comfortable with your physician, check out the gay community grapevine for some names. In any case, don't delay seeking treatment. The longer you wait, the more damage the disease can do.

Your partner too -

It's important that all your sexual partners be treated too. Because if *you* have an infection, they probably have it too. If you're cured and they're not, you can get the disease from them again and again. If you wish, the health department will notify your partners to come in for an examination (your name will not be mentioned). Or you can tell your partners yourself. Better yet, bring them with you when you go to the clinic. Whatever way, make sure your partners are treated.

Remember, treatment for a sexually transmitted disease is *completely confidential*. Even persons under 18 can be treated without their parents' knowledge.



GONORRHEA

When symptoms develop, the first sign of a gonorrhea infection in the penis usually appears three to five days after contact with an infected person. Often it's a burning sensation during urination and a discharge from the penis. A sample of the discharge must be tested to confirm the diagnosis. Don't forget that from 5 to 10 percent of men with gonorrhea in their penises have minimal or no symptoms at all.

Oral gonorrhea and gonorrhea of the anus or rectum usually produce *no* symptoms. That's why routine check-ups every three months are a good idea. If you've had oral-genital intercourse, ask that a swab be taken of your throat and tonsils. Those who have had anal intercourse should request a test of anal secretions. When they do appear, symptoms of rectal gonorrhea include irritation and a discharge.

Gonorrhea is treated with antibiotics. The particular drug will vary with the type of infection. Nothing which you can buy without a prescription will cure gonorrhea. And don't try to treat it yourself with someone else's pills or leftover antibiotics from your medicine chest. You might use the wrong drug, the improper dosage, or a drug that's no longer effective. You also run the risk of an allergic reaction.

Untreated gonorrhea of the penis can cause scarring of the urethra — the tube which conducts urine from the bladder through the prostate and the penis. Or it can infect and damage the prostate. Left untreated, any type of gonorrhea can spread through the bloodstream to cause arthritis, skin rash, heart disease, meningitis and other complications.



NON-SPECIFIC URETHRITIS (NSU)

Non-specific urethritis (NSU) is an inflammation of the urethra of the penis that is not caused by gonorrhea, even though the symptoms are similar. Sometimes this disease is called nongonococcal urethritis, or NGU. It has not been clearly established exactly what causes NSU, but the disease is rare in men who are not sexually active.

Often, the first symptoms of NSU are pain during urination and a discharge from the penis. These symptoms, which usually appear three to five days after exposure, can be so slight that the infected person may not suspect an illness.

The germs which cause NSU respond quickly to treatment with antibiotics. The drug used to treat NSU is *not* the same as the drug for gonorrhea.

SYPHILIS

Ten to 90 days after exposure to the syphilis bacteria, you may develop a chancre (pronounced "shanker"). A chancre is a painless, open sore that can look like a pimple, a blister or a cold sore. The chancre usually appears wherever sexual contact was made. It might be visible — on the penis or lips of the mouth — or hidden in the throat, anus or rectum.

The painless sore will heal within a few weeks, even without treatment, but the disease remains. After a while, there may be a body rash or hair loss which also disappears without treatment, but the disease remains.

Syphilis can be detected with a special blood test. The test can be negative if the disease has been present for less than a month, so you may have to be retested later.

Without proper treatment, syphilis can strike you and your infected partner with heart disease, blindness, crippling and insanity years after the onset of the disease. So if you even suspect that you've been exposed to syphilis, both of you should visit a clinic immediately.



VENEREAL WARTS

Venereal warts, caused by a virus, can develop three to five months after exposure. In gay men, the soft pink warts most frequently affect the rectum, although they can also appear on the penis. Small warts can be treated with local application of a medicine. Larger warts must be removed surgically. It is important to seek treatment for warts quickly, before they spread or enlarge to the point where surgical removal is necessary.

The partner of a person infected with venereal warts has about a 60 percent chance of getting them too. Left untreated, the warts can spread quite extensively. Occasionally they bleed and become very painful.

HERPES

Genital herpes is also caused by a virus. It produces small, painful blisters on or around the penis, anus or mouth. The blisters break and form red, open sores which begin to heal by themselves in 10 to 20 days.

Although there is presently no cure for genital herpes, a doctor can prescribe creams and antibiotics to soothe the pain and prevent further infection of the open sores. It is *very* important not to have sex when blisters or sores are present as this is when the disease can be spread.

Relapses of herpes may occur throughout a person's life.

VIRAL HEPATITIS

This is not strictly a venereal disease, but it deserves discussion because of the high incidence of hepatitis in the gay male population. The first symptoms are fatigue, loss of appetite, nausea, painful joints and a low grade fever. These signs can be followed by jaundice — a darkening of the urine and yellowing of the skin. Many cases of hepatitis are mild and never develop jaundice. Others can lead to massive infections of the liver and even death from liver failure.



There are no drugs which cure hepatitis. Bed rest and a high calorie diet help. Serious cases may require hospitalization. Hepatitis is extremely contagious during certain stages. If you think you've been exposed to hepatitis, see your doctor immediately.

CRABS

Crabs, or pubic lice, are tiny parasites which live in the pubic hair. They are very difficult to spot, but their presence is made known through itching produced by the lice biting your skin to feed on your blood. Pubic lice are usually transmitted by close physical contact. In some cases, you can become infested after sleeping in a bed used by others who had pubic lice.

Diagnosis is made by finding the lice or their eggs attached to the pubic hairs. Pubic lice are treated with several different over-the-counter drugs. Ask your pharmacist. After treatment, you should have a complete change of clean clothing and linens. Once again, your partner must be treated too, or you'll just get the lice all over again.

SCABIES

Scabies is another itchy infestation, caused by tiny mites which burrow under the skin. They like soft warm areas like the inner thighs, skin folds and genitals. They're passed by close physical contact with someone who is infested. A person with scabies usually develops small groups of open sores as a result of scratching.



Scabies can be diagnosed through microscopic examination of a scraping of the sores. It is usually treated with Kwell, a drug available with a prescription. As with pubic lice, you and your partner should be checked and treated at the same time to avoid reinfesting each other.

GASTRO-INTESTINAL DISEASES

Of late, gays are having special problems with several different intestinal diseases that can be transmitted by certain types of sexual contact. Usually these intestinal disorders are found in the tropics, where they are caught from drinking contaminated water or eating improperly washed fresh fruits or vegetables. Gays are contracting these diseases by swallowing tiny amounts of human feces during oral-genital or oral-anal sex, and also through non-sexual transmission (for example, by handling food). These include amebiasis, giardiasis and shigellosis.

The symptoms of a gastro-intestinal disease may begin a few days after exposure. They include diarrhea and abdominal cramps. But most physicians confronted with these symptoms would not suspect a disease common in the tropics. It will help diagnosis if you level with your doctor about your sexual activities. Doctors can confirm the presence of these diseases with lab tests of a stool sample. Your partner should be tested too.

Gastro-intestinal diseases usually can be cured with various drugs. A few persons who contract these intestinal disorders become seriously ill from dehydration or even a life-threatening infection of the liver.

Preventing STDs

The only 100 percent effective method of preventing STDs is abstinence. But here are some alternatives that can help:

1. Wash your hands carefully after urinating and defecating.
2. Wash the genitals and rectal area before and after sex.
3. Use a condom.
4. Urinate immediately after having sex.
5. Keep in mind that any type of sex that involves exposure to feces increases the risk of certain diseases.
6. Know your sex partners.
7. Remember that the more partners you have, the greater your chances of contracting an STD.
8. If you even suspect that you've been exposed to an STD, get checked immediately, and tell the doctor you're gay. Bring your partner with you.
9. Have a regular check-up for STDs every three to six months. Level with the doctor and bring your partner.



A final word -

For more information about sexually transmitted diseases, or for the location of your nearest clinic, call this *toll-free* number: 1-800-227-8922. Your call will be treated *confidentially* — you won't be asked for your name.



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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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