Safer Sex

Your caregiver wants you to have this information about the infections that can be transmitted from sexual contact and how to prevent them. **The idea behind safer sex is that you can be sexually active, and at the same time reduce the risk of giving or getting a sexually transmitted disease (STD)**. Every person should be aware of how to prevent him/herself and his/her sex partner from getting a sexually transmitted disease.

CAUSES OF STDS

STDs are transmitted by sharing body fluids, which contain viruses and bacteria. The following fluids all transmit infections during sexual intercourse and sex acts:

- Semen.
- Saliva.
- Urine.
- Blood.
- Vaginal mucus.

Examples of STDs include:

- Chlamydia.
- Gonorrhea.
- Genital herpes.
- Hepatitis B.
- HIV/AIDS (*human immunodeficiency virus / acquired immunodeficiency syndrome*).
- Syphilis.
- Trichomonas.
- Pubic lice.
- Human papillomavirus (HPV), which may include:
  - Genital warts.
  - Cervical dysplasia.
  - Cervical cancer (can develop with certain types of HPV).

SYMPTOMS

Sexual diseases often cause few or no symptoms until they are advanced, so a person can be infected and spread the infection without knowing it. You never become immune to certain sexual diseases, unless you receive the vaccine for hepatis B and HPV (women). Some STDs respond to treatment very well. Others, like HIV and herpes, cannot be cured, but are treated to reduce their effects.

Specific symptoms include:

- Abnormal vaginal discharge.
- Irritation or itching in and around the vagina, and in the pubic hair.
- Pain during sexual intercourse.
- Bleeding during sexual intercourse.
- Pelvic or abdominal pain.
- Fever.
- Growths in and around the vagina.
- An ulcer in or around the vagina.
- Swollen glands in the groin area.

DIAGNOSIS

- Blood tests.
- Pap test.
- Culture test of abnormal vaginal discharge.

- Colposcopy (*applying special solution and examining the cervix with a lighted magnifying telescope*).
- Laparascopy (*examining the pelvis with a lighted tube, through a small incision*).

TREATMENT

The treatment will depend on the cause of the STD.

- Antibiotic treatment by injection, oral, creams, or suppositories in the vagina.
- Special over-the-counter shampoo, to get rid of pubic lice.
- Removing or treating growths with medicine, freezing, electrocautery (*burning*), or surgery.
- Surgery treatment for HPV of the cervix.
- Supportive medicines for herpes, HIV/AIDS, and hepatitis.

Being careful cannot eliminate all risk of infection, but sex can be made much safer.

Safe sexual practices include hugging, body massage, and gentle touching. Masturbation is safe, as long as body fluids do not contact skin that has sores or cuts. Dry kissing and oral sex on a man wearing a latex condom or on a woman wearing a female condom is also safe. Slightly less safe is intercourse while the man wears a latex condom or wet kissing. It is also safer to have one sex partner that you know is not having sex with anyone else.

LENGTH OF ILLNESS

An STD might be treated and cured in a week, sometimes a month, or more. And it can linger with symptoms for many years. STDs can also cause damage to the female organs. This can cause chronic pain, infertility, and recurrence of the STD, especially herpes, hepatitis, HIV, and HPV.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS AND PREVENTION

- Alcohol and recreational drugs are often the reason given for not practicing safer sex. These substances affect your judgment. Alcohol and recreational drugs can also impair your immune system, making you more vulnerable to disease.
- Do not engage in risky and dangerous sexual practices, including:
  - Vaginal or anal sex without a condom.
  - Oral sex on a man without a condom.
  - Oral sex on a woman without a female condom.
  - Using saliva to lubricate a condom.
  - Any other sexual contact in which body fluids or blood from one partner contact the other partner.
- You should use only latex condoms for men and water soluble lubricants like K-Y Jelly. Vaseline or oils used to lubricate a condom will weaken the condom and increase the chance that it will break.
- **Think very carefully before having sex with anyone who is high risk for STDs and HIV.** This includes IV drug users, people with multiple sexual partners, or people who have had an STD, or a positive hepatitis or HIV blood test.
- Remember that even if your partner has had only one previous partner, their previous partner might have had multiple partners. If so, you are at high risk of being exposed to an STD. You and your sex partner should be the only sex partners with each other, with no one else involved.
- A vaccine is available for hepatitis B and HPV through your caregiver or the Public Health Department. Everyone should be vaccinated with these vaccines.
- Avoid risky sex practices. Sex acts that can break the skin make you more likely to get an STD.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- If you think you have an STD, even if you do not have any symptoms. Contact your caregiver for evaluation and treatment, if needed.
- You think or know your sex partner has acquired an STD.
- You have any of the symptoms mentioned above.

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