Dear Alice,

Sorry to ask and sound stupid, but, what are STDs?

Thanks,
STD

Answer

Dear STD,

No need to apologize. Your question indicates your interest in learning, and there is nothing wrong with wanting to be an informed individual. Lots of people don't know what an STD is.

STD is an abbreviation for Sexually Transmitted Disease, and is a term that has replaced VD, or Venereal Disease. Today, the more commonly used term is STI, which stands for Sexually Transmitted Infection. A sexually transmitted infection is an infection that is passed on through sexual activity from a person who already has an STI. The explanation for the shift in terms from STD to STI is simple yet significant. The term "infection" means that a germ is present in one's body, but the person may not have any signs or symptoms of the infection. The term "disease" means that the infection is causing obvious signs or symptoms in the person. Thus, a sexually transmitted germ - bacteria, virus, parasite, or fungi - causes an infection, which may or may not result in a disease. This distinction is important because many sexually transmitted infections do not result in signs or symptoms, so a person can have an STI and not know it. Therefore, the term STI is a more encompassing term than STD, as it includes infections that cause no symptoms. Some organizations or websites continue to use the term STD, or use the terms STD and STI interchangeably.

Every sexually active person is at risk for contracting an STI, if a partner is infected. To help reduce your risk, you may want to follow safer sex guidelines (see below). If you think you may have an STI, see your health care provider for a checkup. (It's a good idea to regularly get checked for STIs if you are sexually active, even if you don't experience symptoms).

Safer Sex Guidelines

Safer sex means having sex, orgasms, or intercourse without sharing semen, vaginal fluids,
or blood between partners. Safer sex includes ways of minimizing the risk of spreading HIV and other STIs. Some of these techniques include:

- Using a condom correctly and consistently every time a person has vaginal, anal, or oral sex (and using a new condom if switching from one form of sex to another).
- Using a latex barrier for cunnilingus (oral sex on a female) and anilingus (oral-anal contact) such as a dental dam; a non-lubed condom that has its ring removed, is cut down the length, and is opened up to form a rectangle; or non-microwaveable plastic wrap.
- Mutual masturbation.
- Sex with clothes on.

Unsafe sex puts an individual at risk for HIV and other STIs. Unsafe sex allows semen, vaginal lubrication, or blood (body fluids) to be passed from one person to another. These body fluids can spread viruses or bacteria.

For more information on sexually transmitted infections, search the Go Ask Alice! Sexual & Reproductive Health [3] archives. Feel free to also check out the following websites for more information about STIs, support groups, and/or referrals to free and/or low-cost clinics located near you:

- Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) [5]
- CDC National Prevention Information Network [6]
- American Sexual Health Association [7]
- Alice!


Related questions

- Whom to see for an STI? [11]
- Where can I get dams for oral sex? [12]
- Urine STI test [13]
- Now that your partner knows you have herpes... [14]
- Ex has an STI? Tell my current partner? [15]
- Why is testing of asymptomatic STIs not routine? [16]

Resources

- Medical Services (Morningside) [17]
- HIV Testing and Treatment (Morningside) [18]
- Gay Health Advocacy Project (GHAP) (Morningside) [19]
- Medical Services (CUMC) [20]

Published date:
Dec 06, 1996
Last reviewed on: