How to ask a partner if they have any STIs

Dear Alice,

I really enjoy reading your answers on these pages, but here's the question that I haven't seen addressed on your web pages or anywhere else on the Internet. Can you please suggest some appropriate ways to ask a person with whom you're about to have sex if he or she has any sexually transmitted diseases? A few months ago, I met a girl with whom I had sex... and, as I found out later, she had herpes. We did use condoms anyway, but there was still some risk in catching herpes since we didn't use condoms all the time.

Signed,
Getting smarter

Answer

Dear Getting smarter,

There's no A-B-C method of how to ask a partner if they have a sexually transmitted infection or STI (STI is more commonly used now than STD; however, you may see it used interchangeably). Pointers coming in a minute, but first keep this in mind: one of the most common symptoms of an STI is the absence of any symptoms, so your partner-to-be may not even be aware of infections they carry. For this reason, in addition to asking, you both may want to consider getting tested if you haven't done so recently or if you've had any exposures — ideally before getting between the sheets. Communicating about STIs before you're in bed together is also a good idea because when you're aroused, and perhaps not thinking as clearly, discussing STI infections and transmission may not be top of mind.
Now on to some tips for your conversation. First, consider when and how comfortable you are about bringing up the STI discussion. It may be that it's something that's not discussed the first few times you have sex — you both just automatically choose to use condoms, as you described in the case with the woman who had herpes. Or it may be that you're a more verbal person and need to talk about STIs early on in a relationship. However, it's key to note that the sooner you have the discussion, the sooner you can make informed decisions about your health. Additionally, in some places, partners may be opening themselves to legal action if they knew about an STI diagnosis, didn't communicate it to their partner, and then transmitted it to them.

Whenever you talk, it can be helpful to:

- Use language that you're comfortable using.
- Be as direct as possible, knowing that it may be a little awkward (Can you find the courage to embrace and move through the awkwardness? Give it a try!).
- Be yourself.
- Stress that you care for your own and your partner's health, and you believe that these conversations are a key part of any relationship.
- Ask for details — has your partner ever been tested? How do they feel about testing?
- Pick a time and place where you won't be interrupted or disturbed and when you're not sexually engaged.
- Have some suggestions ready for how you can learn more about your sexuality and sexual choices together as a couple. Ideas include going to a bookstore to read up on sexual health books and reviewing pamphlets from a health center. You can also make an appointment together to see a health care provider to discuss your safer sex options.

Condom use as a standard safer sex practice, regardless of sexual history may be a way to reduce risk — and potentially be viewed as a way to bypass this type of discussion. But, rather than looking for ways to avoid the chat, it may be better to view it in terms of what you and your partner(s) stand to gain by having it — greater communication, more coordination of safer sex practices and risk reduction beyond condom use alone, and not least, more space for pleasure rather than worry. And this can all be gained whether the conversation is between folks in a long-term relationship or with someone you just met. However, if you're interested in developing a relationship with increased intimacy over time, it’s a good idea to discuss STIs at some point. It doesn't have to be a trust issue, or a discussion of past relationships and promiscuity or prudence, but more a look at the future and caring for yourselves enough to protect each other.

Best of luck,

Alice!

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