

When Should I Get Tested for STDs?

A Guide to STD Testing

There is never a bad time to get tested for a sexually transmitted disease (STD). If you're sexually active, getting a test for sexually transmitted diseases is a smart decision. If you've been exposed to an STD or had unprotected sex, getting tested can give you peace of mind.

There's no need to be embarrassed about getting tested for STDs, either. STDs are very common, affecting over 3 million people in the US during any given year. The good news is that most STDs are highly responsive to treatment, and many are completely curable.

STDs, also called sexually transmitted infections (STIs), generally require intimate contact to spread from one person to the other, but a few STDs don't.

They include:

- Syphilis. Syphilis can be transferred during oral sex if a person has a syphilis sore in their mouth.
- Human papillomavirus (HPV). HPV is one of the most common viruses in the world and can be passed through most forms of skin-to-skin contact, including casual contact.
- Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV). Herpes simplex viruses come in two variations. HSV-1, oral herpes, causes cold sores and can be passed through oral contact, including kissing or sharing items such as straws, utensils, or toothbrushes. HSV-2, genital herpes, is spread only through sexual contact.

Why Should I Get Tested for STDs?

Like all infections, STDs are best treated the earlier they're caught. Although a delay in getting tested may not make treatment ineffective, the sooner the STD is removed from your system, the better off you'll be.

Here are a few more reasons to get tested:

1. For better health. STDs don't merely cause harm on their own. They all can impair the best working of the immune system, making you more vulnerable to diseases of all sorts.
2. Peace of mind. Many STDs do not show symptoms until they're well-progressed and have advanced into more serious stages. Getting tested will allow you to start treatment and eliminate the infection.
3. Keeping your partners safe. Many STDs are easy to transmit, and most have lasting and severe consequences if left untreated.
4. For a safe pregnancy. If you're a woman who might become pregnant, sexually transmitted diseases can be passed from mother to child during birth.

What STDs Should I Get Tested for?

Most STDs can be diagnosed by testing within a few days to 2 weeks of exposure. However, instead of seeking an individual test for the most common STDs, an STD panel is typically the best way to go, as it will test for and detect the most common STDs, including:

- Chlamydia
- Syphilis
- Gonorrhea
- HSV types 1 and 2
- Hepatitis C
- HIV
- Trichomoniasis

Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most reported STD in the US. Caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia trachomatis*, [chlamydia](#) often has no symptoms, although some people will experience burning during urination or penile/vaginal discharge.

Chlamydia symptoms typically develop from 7 to 21 days after a person becomes infected. A test will typically reveal the presence of chlamydia from about 1 to 2 weeks [after an exposure](#).

The [US Preventative Services Taskforce](#) recommends that people in the following categories get tested once a year:

- Men who have sex with men
- People living with HIV
- Sexually active women under 25
- Women older than 25 having sex with a new partner or multiple partners
- Transgender women who have sex with men

It's important to get tested for chlamydia, as it can be asymptomatic and cause pelvic inflammatory disease, which is known to contribute to infertility in women.

Fortunately treating chlamydia involves nothing more complex than [oral antibiotics](#), such as doxycycline, azithromycin, or levofloxacin.

Syphilis

Syphilis is caused by a bacterium and has several forms and stages, including primary, secondary, and tertiary. The first sign of syphilis is a chancre, typically a small sore that shows up where the virus entered the body. It is often painless and will heal without treatment, but the virus is still alive and active in the body.

Syphilis typically can be found on an STD exam starting around one month after an exposure.

Gonorrhea

Gonorrhea is caused by a bacterium and can affect anyone who is sexually active, although the demographics with the highest rates are young adults and teens between the ages of 15 to 24.

Gonorrhea targets these areas:

- Vagina, uterus, cervix, and fallopian tubes
- Urethra
- Throat
- Anus
- Eyes (rarely)

Gonorrhea can have no symptoms, but it usually causes a pus-like discharge from the penis and vagina, itching in the anus and vagina, rectal bleeding, and pain in the rectum. It can also cause women to have heavier than usual periods, as well as spotting between menstrual cycles.

Testing for gonorrhea involves a doctor taking a sample of fluid from the rectum, vagina, penis, throat, or eyes. Test results may be back within a few hours to a few days. A blood test will usually reveal gonorrhea, but blood tests typically will not.

Gonorrhea can typically be discovered by testing at least 2 weeks after exposure.

Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV-1, HSV-2)

Herpes is a viral infection with two forms, HSV-1 and HSV-2. HSV-1 causes cold sores, leading to painful blisters, and is usually spread by oral-to-oral contact, like kissing. Although HSV-1 ([oral herpes](#)) can be passed through sex, it's highly contagious and does not require intimate contact to spread. [HSV-1](#) can also be transmitted via oral sex to a person's genitals, leading to herpes infection of the genitals.

HSV-1 is usually detectable in a test after at least 3 months have elapsed since a person's exposure to the virus.

HSV-2, genital herpes, is also very common, with almost half a billion people carrying the HSV-2 virus. Although genital herpes is known for producing painful sores, sometimes it shows no symptoms, meaning that a yearly test is a good precaution if a person is sexually active.

Current tests may take up to 16 weeks postexposure to detect genital herpes.

Hepatitis A

All forms of sexually transmitted hepatitis are caused by a virus that has 2 subtypes: hepatitis B and C. A third type of hepatitis, hepatitis A can be spread through sexual contact, but it's typically spread by ingesting viral particles and can be transmitted via casual contact.

Hepatitis A produces symptoms akin to a mild to moderate case of influenza that can last for several weeks to a few months. People usually recover from hepatitis A with no long-term ill effects.

Hepatitis A can be prevented with a vaccination. The CDC does not recommend [routine testing](#) for hepatitis A.

Hepatitis B

Like hepatitis A, hepatitis B has an effective vaccination that can prevent the disease from getting established in a person's body. Hepatitis B spreads through contact with blood, semen, or vaginal secretions, but can also be passed through sharing infected needles, syringes, or even items like shared razors. Infants can contract hepatitis B from an infected mother at birth, which leads to chronic hepatitis in later life.

Hepatitis B is known to be a major contributor to liver cancer and can cause liver failure.

Symptoms of hepatitis B often show up from 2 to 5 months after exposure and tests will generally reveal the presence of the virus on average of 4 weeks after contracting the virus, although a range of anywhere from [1 week to 9 weeks is possible](#).

Hepatitis C

This disease can take up to nine weeks to show up in your blood, and retesting is recommended three months after a positive test to confirm that you have it. Hepatitis C is treatable and can be cured via oral medications taken daily.

Because hepatitis C can take years to become symptomatic, the U.S. Preventive Services Task Force recommends adults have a yearly screening for it.

Hepatitis C will typically become detectable by a blood test 8 to 11 weeks after a person is exposed, but for many, identifying the presence of hepatitis C is more accurate after 6 months post-exposure and in some instances, infections have taken as long as [9 months to show up in a test](#).

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Around 42 % of the current US population carries the [HPV virus](#). Vaginal, anal, and oral sex are its typical routes of infection, and many people will live their entire lives with no ill effects or symptoms. However, HPV can cause these types of cancers in some people, including:

- Anal
- Cervical, vaginal, and vulvar
- Penile
- Oropharyngeal (cancer of the throat, tonsils, or tongue)

Testing will usually detect HPV within a broad range of 3 to 6 months after a person is exposed

There is a vaccine for HPV, and because the vaccine works better the longer it's been in a person's system, physicians recommend 2 doses of the vaccine starting at ages 11 to 12. If a person receives the vaccine at age 15 or older, [3 doses will be needed](#).

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

HIV was the most dangerous of all STDs for decades, leading to the fatal illness Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). In recent years, effective treatments have allowed people with HIV to live healthier and longer lives and in many cases, prevent the escalation of HIV into AIDS. The earlier a person starts their treatment, the better their health will be in the long run.

HIV can be detected through several tests, although these time frames are approximations.

- **Nucleic acid tests (NATs).** These tests will typically reveal the presence of HIV itself within a typical range of at least 10 days, up to 33 days after exposure.
- **Antibody tests.** Antibody tests look for vital antibodies, not the virus itself. They usually take at least 3 to 12 weeks after exposure to reveal the presence of an HIV infection.
- **Rapid antigen/antibody tests.** Rapid antigen tests have a typical range starting around 18 days after an infection, but many sometimes take as 90 days post-infection to be detectable in testing.
- **Combination antigen/antibody tests.** Combination tests take 2 to 6 weeks after you've been exposed to detect the presence of HIV.

Trichomoniasis

[Trichomoniasis](#) is an infection caused by the parasite *Trichomonas vaginalis*. In women, symptoms include:

- Unusual vaginal discharge, which may be yellow-green with an unpleasant smell.
- Discomfort while having sex or urinating
- Itching, soreness, and swelling in and around the vagina

Typically, it takes at least 28 days for trichomoniasis to be positively identified in a test.

When Should I Get Tested for STDs?

Although some STDs will show up within 7 to 14 days of exposure, most will take longer to become detectable by common lab tests. Because everyone's immune system will vary slightly in how vigorously it responds to infections, timing for testing is always an approximation.

STD	How Soon Can I Be Tested?
Chlamydia	1 to 2 weeks
Syphilis	Around 30 to 90 days
Gonorrhea	At least 2 weeks

Herpes HSV-1	After 12 days (on average)
Herpes HSV-2	At least 16 weeks (on average)
Hepatitis A	CDC does not recommend routine testing
Hepatitis B	4 months on average
Hepatitis C	Variable—typically up to 6 months but can extend to 9 months
HPV	3 to 6 months
HIV antibody tests	30 to 90 days, although dependent on the test used
Trichomoniasis	At least 28 days on average

Where Can I Get Tested for STDs?

You can get tested for STDs at an [urgent care center](#). Are you looking for more helpful information on routine health tests or other medical topics? [Check out our blog](#) for more articles like this one.

References

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, July 23). *HPV infection*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/hpv/parents/about-hpv.html>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022, January 3). *Std Facts - Genital herpes*. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.cdc.gov/std/herpes/stdfact-herpes.htm>

Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2021, October 5). *Gonorrhea*. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved September 12, 2022, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/gonorrhea/symptoms-causes/>

Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2020, October 13). *Genital herpes*. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/genital-herpes/symptoms-causes/syc-20356161>

NHS. (n.d.). <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/trichomoniasis/>. NHS choices. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/trichomoniasis/>

NHS. (n.d.). *When should I test?* NHS choices. Retrieved September 14, 2022, from <https://www.practiceplusbrightonstation.nhs.uk/sexual-health-services/when-should-i-test/>

Serum herpes simplex antibodies. Mount Sinai Health System. (n.d.). Retrieved September 14, 2022, from <https://www.mountsinai.org/health-library/tests/serum-herpes-simplex-antibodies>

World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Herpes simplex virus*. World Health Organization. Retrieved September 13, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/herpes-simplex-virus>