

Sexually transmitted infections

You are part of it!
Healthier, fitter, safer.



Sexually transmitted infections

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are very common!

Nearly a million people get an STI every day.

The presence of an untreated STI can increase the risk of becoming infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus, causing AIDS).

The risk of STIs is increased for seafarers because of:

- Working and living away from spouses and partners.
- Single-sex working and living arrangements dominated by men.
- Lack of information about risk and preventive measures.
- Enhanced probability of sex with casual partners due to travelling!

Unprotected vaginal and anal intercourse carries the highest risks for the most dangerous sexually transmitted infections.

The less sexual partners a person has, the lower the risk of infection.

There is no risk of acquiring any sexually transmitted infection from casual day-to-day contact on board.

Hepatitis B, HIV and syphilis are also transmitted through transfusion of contaminated blood or blood products and the use of contaminated needles and medical equipment.

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Symptoms and treatment of STIs

SYMPTOMS

Chlamydia

Men with Chlamydia commonly experience a urethral discharge from the penis, and may have inflammation of the tube leading from the bladder to the tip of the penis. This discomfort may then disappear but the infection can still be passed on to a sexual partner. In women, genital chlamydial infection often does not cause any symptoms. However, there may be non-specific symptoms such as cystitis, a change in the vaginal discharge, or mild lower abdominal pain.

Genital warts

Many people who get the virus (HPV) that leads to genital warts do not show any recognisable symptoms, and this is why the infection can go undiagnosed for a long time. However, if symptoms are present, they may include small white spots or lumps on the penis and around the vulva or anus but also hidden inside the vagina or anus.

TREATMENT

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics, either using a single dose, or a course for a couple of weeks.

Genital warts is treated by either painting them with a liquid, or freezing them with a spray. However, some people need a number of treatments, and if the warts return, further treatment will be required.

SYMPTOMS

Genital herpes

Like genital warts, genital herpes is a condition that often presents no symptoms and can remain undiagnosed for long periods of time. Symptoms may show in the form of flu-like symptoms, itchiness, burning or tingling around the genitals, small, fluid-filled blisters that burst to leave sores, and pain when passing urine.

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is an infection that is found in both sexes and can affect the genitals, anus, rectum and throat. About half of all women infected with gonorrhoea, and over 90% of men experience symptoms, including a thin, watery discharge from the vagina or tip of the penis that can appear yellow or green, and pain when urinating.

Syphilis

The symptoms of syphilis usually begin with a small sore on the penis or vagina. Up to six months after the initial symptoms occur, flu-like symptoms, such as aches and shivering may appear.

TREATMENT

The virus for **genital herpes** remains in the body as there is no treatment that gets rid of it completely. Antiviral drugs may be used to relieve the symptoms.

Early treatment for **gonorrhoea** involves a single dose of antibiotics. If complications occur further treatment will be needed.

Syphilis can be treated during the early stages using a course of antibiotics. It can also be treated during the later stages of infection, but any damage to the heart or nervous system may be irreversible.

SYMPTOMS

Hepatitis B

This viral STI is spread in a similar way to HIV, but is generally more infectious. Symptoms of hepatitis include feeling generally tired and unwell with fevers, aching joints, rashes and jaundice. Some people can be infected without having any symptoms and make a full recovery. Others can be very ill but still recover completely. However, long term infection is also possible. This can lead to progressive liver damage.

TREATMENT

People who are at higher risk of catching **hepatitis B**, such as men who have sex with men, or people who come into contact with human blood at work, can be immunised against the infection. Treatment of active and chronic hepatitis B exists, but is expensive and debilitating. It is restricted to specialised centres.

HIV

Many people do not develop any symptoms when they first become infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). Some people, however, get a flu-like illness within three to six weeks after exposure to the virus. The only way to know if you are HIV-positive is to have a test. Over time, infection with HIV weakens the immune system leading to difficulty fighting off certain infections, leading to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

While there is no cure for **AIDS**, drugs can be used to suppress the HIV virus and preserve the immune system for as long as possible. Antiretroviral drugs cannot completely eradicate the HIV infection; treatment is expensive and complex and most countries have only a few centres that are able to provide it.

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Non-specific urethritis

Non-specific urethritis is an STI that affects men. It causes discomfort of the urethra (the tube that leads from the bladder to the tip of the penis, along which urine is passed), and a urethral discharge is also common.

Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is an infection of the genitals that is caused by the bacterium *trichomonas vaginalis* (TV). The condition often has no symptoms, but symptoms may include a yellow or green discharge from the vagina with soreness. Men usually act as carriers and do not show symptoms.

Pubic lice

Symptoms of pubic lice include itchy skin, black powder (lice droppings) in underwear and white eggs.

TREATMENT

Non-specific urethritis (NSU) is treated with antibiotics, although damage to the urethra can take time to heal.

Trichomonas vaginalis (TV) is easily treated with a course of antibiotic tablets.

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<p>Thrush</p> <p>Symptoms of thrush include intense itching around the penis or vagina, with a thick, white discharge, and the appearance of tiny white spots around the genitals.</p>	<p>Thrush is easily treated using pessaries (tablets that are inserted into the vagina), cream or tablets. Creams are usually used to treat men who have thrush.</p>

The absence of symptoms does not guarantee absence of infection.

In any case, consult a doctor if you have taken a risk, even if there are no symptoms.

As STIs are easily passed on through sexual contact, it is important that current and past sexual partners are notified and treated, in order to reduce the risk of spreading and re-infection.

STIs, HIV/AIDS on board

Sexual or blood borne transmission are not likely routes for the transmission of infection in the normal course of work at sea.

Occupational exposure risks are slight and limited to the treatment of injuries and to procedures undertaken by the small number of healthcare staff working on large vessels.

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HIV cannot be transmitted by normal social contact, via insects, via normal skin contact or via toilets.

The HIV virus is transmitted in blood and body fluids and so infection arises from sexual contact, needle sharing in drug users and from contamination during medical procedures.

Pre-employment HIV testing is illegal in many jurisdictions. It can only be justified if it can be shown to predict likely risks while working at sea prior to the next medical assessment.

HIV testing should be a matter for the individual and their clinical advisers and not a condition for obtaining employment. It may lead to discrimination against the person either by denial of employment or harassment by other workers.

Precautions against STIs

- **Safer sex reduces risks:**
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 - A lot of unplanned and unsafe sexual contacts occur under the influence of alcohol!
 - When it comes to safer sex, rely on yourself.
 - Condoms are the best protection.
- **A high standard of infection control practice has to be used in the care of all diseases and injuries on board**
 - Careful handling and disposal of sharp objects (needles or other sharp objects).
 - Hand-washing before and after a procedure.
 - Use of gloves, gowns and masks for direct contact with blood and other body fluids.
 - Safe disposal of waste contaminated with body fluids and blood.
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 - Proper handling of soiled linen and clothing.
- **Vaccination against hepatitis B is strongly recommended!**
- **Blood transfusions should be avoided in most developing countries as donors are seldom tested for HIV antibodies.**

Where to find advice?

If you would like to have more information on STIs, HIV/AIDS and are not able to consult your doctor or a medical clinic, you can contact SeafarerHelp, a free and confidential service provided by the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN).

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India	1 800 425 4357
Ireland	00 800 7323 2737
Israel	012/013/014 800 7323 2737
Italy	00 800 7323 2737
Japan	001/0041/0061 010 800 7323 2737
Korea	001/002/008 800 7323 2737
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Malaysia	00 800 7323 2737
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Netherlands	00 800 7323 2737
New Zealand	00 800 7323 2737
Norway	00 800 7323 2737
Philippines	00 800 737283 00
Portugal	00 800 7323 2737
Russia	810 800 2136 2044
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Find us on:



International Seafarers' Welfare
and Assistance Network

E iswan@iswan.org.uk

W www.seafarershealth.org



Symptoms and treatment of STIs

SYMPTOMS

Chlamydia

Men with Chlamydia commonly experience a urethral discharge from the penis, and may have inflammation of the tube leading from the bladder to the tip of the penis. This discomfort may then disappear but the infection can still be passed on to a sexual partner. In women, genital chlamydial infection often does not cause any symptoms. However, there may be non-specific symptoms such as cystitis, a change in the vaginal discharge, or mild lower abdominal pain.

Genital warts

Many people who get the virus (HPV) that leads to genital warts do not show any recognisable symptoms, and this is why the infection can go undiagnosed for a long time. However, if symptoms are present, they may include small white spots or lumps on the penis and around the vulva or anus but also hidden inside the vagina or anus.

TREATMENT

Chlamydia is treated with antibiotics, either using a single dose, or a course for a couple of weeks.

Genital warts is treated by either painting them with a liquid, or freezing them with a spray. However, some people need a number of treatments, and if the warts return, further treatment will be required.

SYMPTOMS

Genital herpes

Like genital warts, genital herpes is a condition that often presents no symptoms and can remain undiagnosed for long periods of time. Symptoms may show in the form of flu-like symptoms, itchiness, burning or tingling around the genitals, small, fluid-filled blisters that burst to leave sores, and pain when passing urine.

Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is an infection that is found in both sexes and can affect the genitals, anus, rectum and throat. About half of all women infected with gonorrhoea, and over 90% of men experience symptoms, including a thin, watery discharge from the vagina or tip of the penis that can appear yellow or green, and pain when urinating.

Syphilis

The symptoms of syphilis usually begin with a small sore on the penis or vagina. Up to six months after the initial symptoms occur, flu-like symptoms, such as aches and shivering may appear.

TREATMENT

The virus for **genital herpes** remains in the body as there is no treatment that gets rid of it completely. Antiviral drugs may be used to relieve the symptoms.

Early treatment for **gonorrhoea** involves a single dose of antibiotics. If complications occur further treatment will be needed.

Syphilis can be treated during the early stages using a course of antibiotics. It can also be treated during the later stages of infection, but any damage to the heart or nervous system may be irreversible.

SYMPTOMS

Hepatitis B

This viral STI is spread in a similar way to HIV, but is generally more infectious. Symptoms of hepatitis include feeling generally tired and unwell with fevers, aching joints, rashes and jaundice. Some people can be infected without having any symptoms and make a full recovery. Others can be very ill but still recover completely. However, long term infection is also possible. This can lead to progressive liver damage.

HIV

Many people do not develop any symptoms when they first become infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). Some people, however, get a flu-like illness within three to six weeks after exposure to the virus. The only way to know if you are HIV-positive is to have a test. Over time, infection with HIV weakens the immune system leading to difficulty fighting off certain infections, leading to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

TREATMENT

People who are at higher risk of catching **hepatitis B**, such as men who have sex with men, or people who come into contact with human blood at work, can be immunised against the infection. Treatment of active and chronic hepatitis B exists, but is expensive and debilitating. It is restricted to specialised centres.

While there is no cure for **AIDS**, drugs can be used to suppress the HIV virus and preserve the immune system for as long as possible. Antiretroviral drugs cannot completely eradicate the HIV infection; treatment is expensive and complex and most countries have only a few centres that are able to provide it.

SYMPTOMS

Non-specific urethritis

Non-specific urethritis is an STI that affects men. It causes discomfort of the urethra (the tube that leads from the bladder to the tip of the penis, along which urine is passed), and a urethral discharge is also common.

Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is an infection of the genitals that is caused by the bacterium *trichomonas vaginalis* (TV). The condition often has no symptoms, but symptoms may include a yellow or green discharge from the vagina with soreness. Men usually act as carriers and do not show symptoms.

Pubic lice

Symptoms of pubic lice include itchy skin, black powder (lice droppings) in underwear and white eggs.

TREATMENT

Non-specific urethritis (NSU) is treated with antibiotics, although damage to the urethra can take time to heal.

Trichomonas vaginalis (TV) is easily treated with a course of antibiotic tablets.

Pubic lice are easily treated. Special shampoos, creams or lotions are used to kill the lice and their eggs.

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