

# Sexually transmitted infections



I GET INFORMED  
I GET VACCINATED  
I PROTECT MYSELF

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# Sexually transmitted infections (STIs)

**Unprotected sex – heterosexual, homosexual, vaginal, oral or anal – can spread HIV and other more or less severe infections.**

These are named sexually transmitted infections (STIs) since they are caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites transmitted during sexual intercourse, particularly due to direct contact between infected body fluids (semen, vaginal discharge or blood from small lesions) and genital, anal or mouth mucous membranes.

There are often no symptoms initially (asymptomatic infections) and for this reason the person who is infected could unknowingly transmit it to other people. Early treatment often leads to complete healing or, at least, makes it possible to reduce complications and have a better prognosis.

Some infections like HIV, hepatitis B and C and syphilis can be transmitted sexually but also through infected blood (sores, needle exchange) or can pass from the mother to the baby through the placenta during pregnancy, or at delivery or through breastfeeding.

Some infections can also be transmitted through saliva – e.g. Papillomavirus and Herpes simplex virus – or due to mixed use of sexual “objects”. Transmission through skin-to-skin contact (scabies mites) or through stool (hepatitis A virus) is also possible.

## IT IS GOOD TO KNOW THAT:

- IF YOU HAVE A STI IT IS EASIER FOR YOU TO GET HIV.
- YOU CAN HAVE MORE THAN ONE STI AT A TIME.
- STIs DO NOT GIVE IMMUNITY AND A NEW INFECTION IS POSSIBLE AT ANY TIME.
- A PERSON WITH A STI CAN BE CONTAGIOUS FOR MANY YEARS EVEN WITH NO SYMPTOMS – E.G. UNTREATED HIV INFECTION.

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## WHO IS MOST AT RISK FOR STI

- ANYONE HAVING SEX WITH A PARTNER WHO HAS A STI CAN BE AT RISK OF GETTING A SEXUAL INFECTION.
- HAVING SEX ONLY ONCE CAN GIVE YOU A SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTION.
- THE MORE PARTNERS YOU HAVE, THE GREATER YOUR RISK OF BEING EXPOSED TO A STI.

IF USED PROPERLY,  
CONDOMS ARE  
THE MOST EFFECTIVE WAY  
TO REDUCE  
THE RISK  
OF GETTING A  
SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED  
INFECTION.



## HIV/AIDS infections

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is found in blood, semen, vaginal discharge and breast milk of the person infected. It can be transmitted by having unprotected sex with untreated HIV-positive partners and through infected blood, but it can also pass from the mother to the baby during pregnancy, at delivery or through breastfeeding.

The presence of genital lesions caused by another STI like genital herpes or syphilis can increase the risk of getting HIV during sex.

People infected with HIV may have no symptoms for a long time, during which however the infection is present and can be transmitted. This is why **receiving an HIV test is essential**, especially if you have unprotected sex. To get an HIV test you can contact your general practitioner or go to a Test & Counselling Centre where **the test is free-of-charge and even anonymous (to know where to go visit: [helpaids.it/test](https://helpaids.it/test), AIDS freephone number 800 856080).**

An early diagnosis of HIV infection is extremely important, since it makes it possible to treat it with specific drugs that do not heal the infection – as they do not completely eliminate the virus from the body – but stop the virus from multiplying.

FOR MORE INFORMATION AND/OR TO FIND A  
PrEP CENTRE IN THE EMILIA-ROMAGNA REGION,  
VISIT [helpaids.it](https://helpaids.it)

**If taken properly and in the right dosage, these drugs can control the HIV infection and the life expectancy of HIV-positive people is similar to that of the general population.**

**People living with HIV who are virally suppressed cannot transmit HIV. Essentially, the antiretroviral therapy protects from progression to AIDS, which is characterized by a high rate of mortality.**

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**THE ANTIRETROVIRAL THERAPY CAN ALSO BE USED TO PREVENT THE TRANSMISSION OF HIV FOLLOWING A POSSIBLE EXPOSURE** SUCH AS OCCASIONAL UNPROTECTED SEX OR A BROKEN CONDOM DURING SEXUAL ACTIVITY. THIS IS NAMED POST-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PEP). PEP IS PRESCRIBED BY THE INFECTIOUS DISEASE SPECIALIST OR THE E.R. DOCTOR TO PEOPLE WHO HAD NEGATIVE RESULTS FROM THE SCREENING TEST AND MUST BE STARTED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AND HOWEVER WITHIN 72 HOURS FROM POSSIBLE EXPOSURE TO HIV. NEVERTHELESS, PEP IS NOT 100% EFFECTIVE AND SHOULD NEVER BE CONSIDERED AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO CONDOMS.

**ON THE OTHER HAND, PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PrEP) MEANS TAKING THE ANTIRETROVIRAL MEDICINES BEFORE A POTENTIALLY RISKY SEXUAL ENCOUNTER.** IT IS SUGGESTED TO HIV-NEGATIVE PEOPLE WHO ENGAGE IN HIGH-RISK SEXUAL ACTIVITY FOR HIV TRANSMISSION.



**REMEMBER:  
HIV TEST IS FREE  
AND CAN BE  
ANONYMOUS!**

# Genital herpes

It is caused by the Herpes simplex virus type 1 or type 2 which causes sores in the skin and mucous membranes.

Sores in the skin usually start as tiny blisters in clusters that eventually ulcer or crust over. The ones in mucous membranes are like erosions in clusters. They cause severe pain and stinging.

In women, genital herpes mostly appears on labia majora and labia minora, but sores can also appear in the vagina and cervix associated with serous and white discharge.

In men, sores usually occur on the glans and prepuce, but they can also appear on the anus and surrounding area.

**Both in men and women, genital herpes can affect the skin of the genital area, pubis, groin and perineum (the region containing the scrotum or vulva and spreading to the coccyx).** Localised lesions can also appear in other parts of the body.

Transmission occurs through contact with a person who eliminates the virus from the sores, but it can also occur when lesions are not visible.

**Sores heal in 1 to 4 weeks.** However, once infected, the virus will lie dormant in the body for the whole life and may reactivate from time to time. The disease reoccurs and the frequency of recurrences varies from person to person, especially in the presence of conditions that cause psycho-physical stress and/or weaken the immune system.

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**THE THERAPY INCLUDES ANTIVIRAL DRUGS THAT MUST BE PRESCRIBED BY THE DOCTOR.** NO TREATMENT CAN ELIMINATE THE VIRUS FROM THE BODY, BUT THE THERAPY CAN REDUCE SYMPTOMS AND SHORTEN THE ACUTE PHASE OF THE DISEASE. IF AN INFANT IS INFECTED DURING CHILDBIRTH, THIS CONDITION CAN BE VERY SEVERE (NEONATAL HERPES).

**REMEMBER:  
SPECIFIC DRUGS ARE  
AVAILABLE FOR  
TREATMENT OF GENITAL  
HERPES.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **HERPES GENITALE**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX

# Syphilis (lues)

Syphilis is caused by the bacterium *Treponema pallidum*, which is transmitted through contact with infected discharge.

**The sores caused by syphilis mainly appear in the genitals, anus-rectum or mouth.**

Syphilis develops in different stages. During the initial primary phase, a sore develops on the cervix, penis or anal area and is associated with swelling of the lymph nodes near the area of infection, such as inguinal lymph nodes.

A person with syphilis may not notice the sores because often they are not painful or itchy. Syphilis can be easily transmitted since the primary stage.

**In the more advanced stages, it can cause rashes and eventually lead to damage to bones, liver, heart and brain.**

If a woman is infected during pregnancy or delivery, this can cause miscarriage, baby's death after birth, premature birth of low weight babies and/or of babies affected by generalised disease with damage to nervous system, deafness, and bone malformations.

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**SYPHILIS IS COMMONLY DIAGNOSED WITH A SIMPLE BLOOD TEST AND IS TREATED WITH ANTIBIOTICS.**

**REMEMBER:  
EARLY DIAGNOSIS  
THROUGH A SIMPLE  
BLOOD TEST  
IS ESSENTIAL!**

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **SIFILIDE**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX



# Human papillomavirus (HPV)

HPV is a group of very common viruses. There are over 120 serotypes of the HPV, about 40 of which can cause infection in the genital mucous membranes (mainly cervix and vagina), in the anus and also in the oropharynx, which is the innermost part of the mouth. Penetrative sex is not required for the transmission of HPV, as the viruses can also spread through skin-to-skin genital contact, which means that condoms do not completely eliminate the risk of infection.

Virus types 6 and 11 can cause genital warts, which are benign painful lesions, either flat-surfaced or verrucous (condylomata acuminata or cockscomb) that appear in the genital and/or anal tract of men and women. Virus types 16 and 18 can cause changes in the mucous membranes of the genital tract, anus or oropharynx. If the cellular changes persist and are not treated, they can progress to cancer over many years. HPV accounts for almost all cervical cancers and some cancers of the anus, vagina, penis, vulva and oropharynx.

**HPV infections are very common. In most cases they are transient and clear up on their own without causing the disease. If on the contrary the infection progresses to the disease, effective therapies are available.**

Nonetheless, as of today, no treatment can eliminate the virus from the body completely.

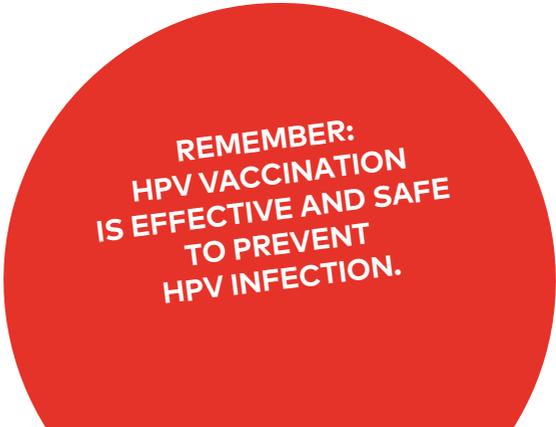
FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](https://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **HPV**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX

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**THE EMILIA-ROMAGNA REGION OFFERS FREE VACCINATION TO YOUNG GIRLS AGED 12 TO 26 AND YOUNG BOYS AGED 12 TO 18, HIV-POSITIVE PEOPLE, MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN (MSM), SEX WORKERS, PEOPLE WHO WILL HAVE TO TAKE IMMUNOMODULATORS OR IMMUNOSUPPRESSANTS AND WOMEN RECENTLY TREATED FOR HPV-ASSOCIATED LESIONS.**

ALL OTHER PEOPLE CAN HOWEVER GET VACCINATED AT THE VACCINATION CENTRES OF THE LOCAL HEALTH AUTHORITIES BY PAYING ONLY PART OF THE COST.

**IN 1996 THE EMILIA-ROMAGNA REGION STARTED AN ACTIVE AND FREE-OF-CHARGE SCREENING PROGRAMME FOR THE PREVENTION OF CERVICAL CANCER FOR ALL WOMEN AGED 25 TO 64.** WOMEN AGED 25 TO 29 CAN HAVE A PAP TEST EVERY 3 YEARS AND WOMEN AGED 30 TO 64 CAN HAVE AN HPV TEST EVERY 5 YEARS.



**REMEMBER:  
HPV VACCINATION  
IS EFFECTIVE AND SAFE  
TO PREVENT  
HPV INFECTION.**

## Viral hepatitis A, B, C

HAV (Hepatitis A virus), HBV (Hepatitis B virus) and HCV (Hepatitis C virus) **can cause liver infections**, either symptomatic or asymptomatic.

**Hepatitis A virus** is found in the stool and blood of HAV-infected people. Transmission occurs by ingestion of contaminated food, but also through oral-anal sex or by putting fingers or objects contaminated with the stool in the mouth.

**Hepatitis B virus** can be transmitted sexually or through the blood or other body fluids of HBV-infected people, and also from the mother to the baby at birth.

**Hepatitis C virus** is transmitted mainly by contact with infected blood. There is evidence of sexual transmission, although infrequent.

**The most common symptom** associated with severe hepatitis is **the yellowing of the skin and sclera (jaundice)**, along with dark urine and light-coloured stool.

REMEMBER:  
THERE ARE SAFE  
AND EFFECTIVE  
VACCINES  
THAT CAN PREVENT  
HEPATITIS A AND B!

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **VACCINAZIONI EPATITE**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX

## Gonorrhoea (or the clap)

Gonorrhoea is caused by the bacterium *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* also known as gonococcus, **which infects the lower urinary tract in men and the urinary tract and genitals of women**. Infection can also occur in the rectum and pharynx both in men and women.

The infection is associated with painful urination and a white-yellow discharge from the penis or the vagina. Symptoms of rectal infection may include white-yellow discharge, anal itching, anal bleeding, or abdominal pain.

In women the infection is often asymptomatic and, if untreated, can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease and can reduce fertility.

**An infected pregnant woman can pass on the infection to the baby during birth**. The baby usually develops an eye infection, but cases of arthritis, meningitis and heart infection have also been reported.

REMEMBER:  
GONORRHEA CAN BE  
TREATED WITH ANTIBIOTICS.  
THE PARTNER OF THE  
INFECTED PERSON  
SHOULD ALSO BE TREATED.

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **GONORREA**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX

## Chlamydia Trachomatis

This bacterium causes urethritis and cervical infections in women.

Infections in women are asymptomatic in 70% of the cases, while in men they are usually associated with symptoms.

Symptoms are similar to gonorrhoea: painful urination and transparent, white or yellow discharge from the penis or the vagina.

**Diagnosis is often made when the infection gets worse and causes prostatitis in men, or salpingitis or pelvic inflammatory disease in women, which can reduce fertility.**

Chlamydia trachomatis can also cause infection in the pharynx and the rectum following oral or anal sex.

**REMEMBER:  
THESE INFECTIONS ARE  
TREATED WITH ANTIBIOTICS.  
THE PARTNER OF THE  
INFECTED PERSON SHOULD  
ALSO BE TREATED.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **CHLAMYDIA**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX

## Scabies

Scabies is a parasitic disease caused by the mite *Sarcoptes scabiei*.

**It is transmitted by direct skin-to-skin contact.** Transmission can more rarely occur by sharing articles such as clothing, bedding or towels that have just been used by an infested person.

**Symptoms involve severe itching all over the body, especially at night, the appearance of skin lesions** (burrow tracks) and red rashes, either flat-surfaced or bumpy, associated with sores caused by scratching.

The sites most commonly affected are webbing between the fingers, wrists, elbow folds, armpits, below the breasts, around the navel, buttocks and behind the knee.

**REMEMBER:  
SCABIES  
CAN BE TREATED  
WITH SPECIFIC  
ANTIPARASITIC DRUGS.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION,  
VISIT [guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)  
WRITE **SCABBIA**  
IN THE SEARCH BOX

# What do I need to know?

**Using a condom is the most effective way to reduce the risk of getting most of sexually transmitted infections.**

**You should use it properly** and check, before use, the condition of the condom and expiration date.

**Put it on** before sex (vaginal, anal, oral) **paying attention not to damage it** with your nails or any sharp objects like rings, zippers or buckles. Carefully take off the condom only after ejaculation and avoid spilling any semen. Withdrawing the penis (without condom) before orgasm does not protect against the transmission of viruses, bacteria and parasites.

**A condom should never be used more than once.** If it slips off, put on a new one before continuing. You should also use a new condom if you switch from one kind of sex to another.

**Condoms must be kept sealed in their original packages in a cool and dry place**, out of heat and direct sunlight. Non-latex condoms are also available for individuals with allergies to latex.

Ask a pharmacist or your doctor whether the condom can be used with products that are applied on the penis or in the vagina, such as lubricants.

Condoms break very rarely. If it happens, withdraw the penis immediately and wash semen out of the genitals, anus or the mouth to minimise the risk of sexually transmitted infections or pregnancy.

**Although not so common, a female condom known as Femidom does exist.** It is a transparent pouch made of polyurethane that is inserted into the vagina before sex. It is as effective as male condoms and protects women against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Male and female condoms must never be used at the same time.

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- **DRUGS AND ALCOHOL CAN LOWER YOUR ATTENTION AND MAKE YOU LESS LIKELY TO PROTECT YOURSELF** ESPECIALLY DURING SEX. YOU MIGHT UNDERESTIMATE THE RISKS AND HAVE OCCASIONAL UNPROTECTED SEX WITH EXPOSURE TO INFECTION TRANSMISSION.
  - TO AVOID CONTACT WITH TRACES OF INFECTED BLOOD, **DO NOT SHARE** RAZORS, SCISSORS, TOOTHBRUSHES AND OTHER PERSONAL HYGIENE **ITEMS WHICH COULD CUT THE SKIN OR CAUSE LESIONS TO MUCOUS MEMBRANES.**
  - **INJECTING DRUGS CAN CAUSE VIRUS TRANSMISSION.** IF YOU INJECT DRUGS, ALWAYS USE SINGLE-USE NEEDLES AND SYRINGES. SHARING NEEDLES AND SYRINGES CAN CAUSE THE TRANSMISSION OF INFECTED BLOOD AND CAN PASS ON THE INFECTION.

## What to do in case of a STI?

STIs cause distress not only because of the disease, but also because they involve your intimacy and your relationships.

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**BUT YOU SHOULD REMEMBER THAT YOUR DOCTOR AND/OR OTHER SPECIALIST DOCTORS CAN HELP YOU, LIKE FOR ANY OTHER ISSUE.**

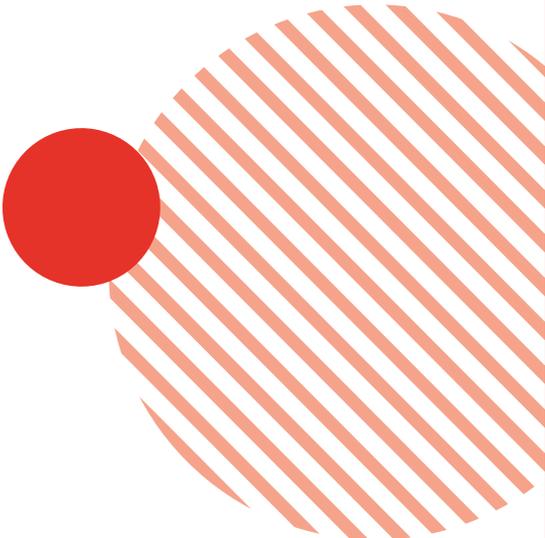
**YOU CAN ALSO GET INFORMATION AND SUPPORT FROM PATIENTS' ASSOCIATIONS AND/OR GROUPS INVOLVED IN THE PREVENTION AND FIGHT AGAINST SOME OF THESE INFECTIONS.**

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Moreover the Regional Health Service has dedicated offices and specific diagnostic-therapeutic programmes for the prevention and assistance to people with a STI. Confidentiality and anonymity upon the individual's request are always guaranteed.

Your family doctor is your primary contact person, but you can also contact the operators of dedicated offices, i.e., Counselling centres, Young people counselling centres, STI-dedicated offices.





## For more information:

CALL THE FREEPHONE NUMBER

**800 033 033**

Monday to Friday **from 8.30am to 6.00pm**

Saturday **from 8.30am to 1.00pm**

VISIT THE WEBSITE

**[guidaservizi.saluter.it](http://guidaservizi.saluter.it)**

and write

"INFEZIONI A TRASMISSIONE SESSUALE"

in the search box

VISIT THE WEBSITE

**[helpaids.it](http://helpaids.it)**

to find out more about HIV and AIDS.

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