

Fundamentals of Teaching STIs Core Concept

STIs are very common. Prevention, testing, and treatment of STIs is a routine part of caring for one’s sexual health.

RATIONALE

How do we teach, and why do we teach that way?

- Reducing shame and stigma by normalizing prevention, testing, and treatment of STIs is a primary goal of STI education.
- It is important to treat everyone with respect, including people living with STIs or those who may be at risk for contracting an STI.
- When teaching, keep in mind that it is very likely that someone in the room has had an STI, or has a loved one who has.
- Sexually transmitted infections can occur at any point in someone’s life. It’s important to check in with a healthcare provider when someone has questions about transmission or testing.

TALKING POINTS

What do we say?

- STIs are very common.
- STIs can be transmitted via two types of contact: (1) fluids from a person with an STI enter another person’s body, or (2) infected skin making contact with susceptible skin of another.
- Risk of STI transmission is greatly lowered when people abstain from sex, use condoms when they do have sex, and do not share needles.¹
- Using barrier methods such as condoms and dental dams during sex can prevent STI transmission. Condoms are accessible and easy to use. Many teens and adults successfully use condoms.
- Different sexual behaviors can increase or reduce risk for STI transmission.
- Symptoms of STIs vary, but it’s common to not have any symptoms at all. People often don’t know they have an STI until they get tested.²
- The only way to know if someone has an STI is to get tested.

KNOW THE FACTS

FACT: Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) refer to the same infections and can be used interchangeably. Using the term infection is more accurate as an infection can cause a disease.

FACT: A person cannot get an STI from casual contact, like holding hands, sharing food, or using a toilet seat.

FACT: All STIs are treatable. STIs caused by bacteria and parasites are curable.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT STIs

What is the most common STI?

- A lot of people have this question. The most common STI in the United States is the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)³. A person can lower their chances of contracting HPV by getting vaccinated. The vaccine is a safe and effective option to protect against HPV strains that are most likely to cause cancer. If someone is sexually active, correctly using a condom or dental dam every time they have sex will also lower their chances of getting HPV. If anyone has

additional questions, the CDC website is a great source for information on HPV and other STIs.

Aren't people with STIs just kind of asking for it?

- Thank you for bringing this up. There is a lot of stigma associated with contracting an STI, but they are very common! Everyone knows someone who has had an STI, whether they're aware of it or not. Feelings of blame and shame can keep people from getting the health care they need.⁴ Preventing, testing, and treating STIs is a routine part of caring for one's sexual health.

Can lesbians get STIs?

- Transmission of STIs depends on what people do together sexually, not their sexual orientation. I appreciate you asking about ways someone can protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections. Anyone who engages in oral, vaginal, or anal sex without a condom or other barrier method, like a dental dam is at risk for an STI. Using a barrier method is one way someone can prevent STI transmission, but it's not the only way. Talking openly and honestly with a partner or a healthcare provider and getting tested for STIs are other ways for someone to protect their health.

What is a dental dam and how is it used?

- A dental dam is a thin sheet of latex or plastic that can be placed over a vulva or an anus to prevent the mouth from coming into contact with their partner's body. Dental dams are not made to be used on a penis during oral sex to create a barrier between the penis and mouth. Dental dams and condoms should never be re-used.

To learn more, take the
[Spark*ED Teaching STIs & HIV self-paced course](#)

1, 2, 3 [Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\)](#). Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

4 [What is HIV stigma?](#) Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Let's Stop HIV Together, 2022