



# **SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED & BLOOD-BORNE INFECTIONS (STBBIs):**



**WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW**

The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute provides services to all those living on Treaty Lands 2, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 10, and the homeland of the Métis. The Saskatchewan Prevention Institute is dedicated to moving forward on a shared path of reconciliation and partnership. We are all Treaty people.

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# WHAT ARE STBBIs?

STBBIs are sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections. This term captures the two main ways STBBIs can be transmitted (passed to someone): through sexual contact and through contact with blood. They are also sometimes called STIs (sexually transmitted infections) or STDs (sexually transmitted diseases).

Anyone can get an STBBI. STBBIs affect people of every age, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, income level, and education level.

## STBBIs can be spread through:

- Unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex (sex without a condom)
- Skin-to-skin contact with or kissing an infected area
- Sharing sex toys
- Mother to child during pregnancy, labour, or after delivery through breastfeeding
- Contact with infected body fluids like blood, semen, saliva, vaginal fluids, and breast milk
- Sharing needles and other drug equipment, or getting a tattoo/piercing with unsterilized equipment

## STBBIs cannot be spread through:

- Hugging or holding hands
- Sharing food or drinks
- Using public washrooms
- Swimming in public pools
- Sweat or tears

## What are my chances of getting an STBBI?

### High Risk

- Vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse without a condom

### Lower Risk

- Vaginal or anal sex with a condom
- Oral sex with a condom or dental dam
- Mutual masturbation with a barrier (e.g., condom)

### Safe

- Masturbation (alone)

# PREVENTION & HARM REDUCTION

## How do I reduce my risk of getting STBBIs?

- Use condoms. When used correctly, condoms are very effective at preventing the spread of most STBBIs.
- Talk to your partner about their STBBI status (get tested) before you have sex. If either of you have an STBBI, get treated.
- Choose not to have sex (i.e., abstinence).
- Some STBBIs can be spread by non-sexual contact with infected blood (e.g., HIV, HCV). If you use drugs, use new equipment (e.g., needles, pipes) every time and do not share drug use equipment.
- PrEP and PEP are medications that can prevent HIV infection before or after exposure.

**Alcohol and drugs impair judgment and decision making. This may lead to risky sexual behaviours, like not using a condom. Remember, someone cannot give consent if they are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.**

## Vaccines

In Canada, there are vaccines available for hepatitis B and HPV (human papillomavirus). Vaccines protect you by teaching your body how to protect itself from a virus. Talk to a healthcare provider to learn more about vaccines to protect your sexual health.

## PrEP

PrEP stands for pre-exposure prophylaxis. It is a prescribed medication taken every day by someone who does not have HIV to prevent them from getting HIV. It is recommended for people who are at higher risk of getting HIV. PrEP is not for everyone; the best way to determine if it's right for you is to talk to a healthcare professional.

## PEP

PEP stands for post-exposure prophylaxis. It is an HIV medication that is prescribed when someone who does not have HIV has been exposed to HIV to help prevent HIV transmission from occurring. PEP can only be taken within 72 hours of exposure to HIV. If you think you have been exposed to HIV, go to your local clinic or emergency room to talk to a healthcare professional.

# TESTING

## When should I get tested?

- If you have a new partner
- If you have unprotected sex (e.g., sex without a condom or the condom broke)
- If you or your partner have sex with other people

Many STBBIs have no symptoms or have symptoms that are easily missed. STBBIs can be spread even if there are no symptoms. If you are sexually active, get tested every 3-6 months or with each new partner. Talk to your partner(s) and make sure each of you are tested and treated. Even if you have been treated for an STBBI in the past, you can still get it again.

## How do I get tested?

Testing can be performed by a healthcare professional at a clinic or hospital. To find a testing location in Saskatchewan, use the Keep It Safe Saskatchewan (KIS-SK) app, available on the Apple App Store and Google Play Store.

## What should I expect when I get tested?

You will be asked some screening questions about your sexual history to determine what to test you for. Testing can include collecting a urine sample, blood tests, taking a swab (vaginal, cervical, rectal, or throat), or visual inspection.

## STBBIs and Stigma

There is often a lot of shame and stigma surrounding sex and sexual health. Shame and stigma can prevent people from speaking about STBBIs with their partners, or from seeking testing and treatment.

It is important to know that it is not wrong or shameful to be tested for or diagnosed with an STBBI. STBBIs are common and most of them are curable or can be well-managed with medication. Prevention, testing, and treatment are important to protect your health and prevent long-term harm.

**STBBIs are preventable, treatable, and in many cases curable.**

# WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE? BACTERIA, VIRUS, OR PARASITE

It is important to understand that not all STBBIs are the same. There are three different types of STBBIs: bacterial, viral, and parasitic. These differences matter for prevention and treatment.

## **Bacteria**

Bacteria are microscopic living organisms made up of a single cell. The bacteria that cause STBBIs are spread through sexual contact or during childbirth. Bacterial STBBIs can often be treated with antibiotics, leading to a complete cure where the bacteria are no longer in the body. Bacterial STBBIs include chlamydia (page 11), gonorrhea (page 15), and syphilis (page 25).

## **Viruses**

Viruses are microscopic non-living organisms that need a host to replicate themselves. STBBIs caused by a virus are often manageable with medications, but most are not curable. Some viral STBBIs can be cleared by the body's immune system (e.g., hepatitis C), but others remain in the body forever. Viral STBBIs include herpes type I & II (page 13), hepatitis B (page 17), hepatitis C (page 19), HIV (page 21), and HPV (page 23).

## **Parasites**

Parasites are tiny bugs that can live inside or outside the body. The parasites that cause STBBIs can be spread through sexual and non-sexual contact. STBBIs caused by parasites can be treated with medications, leading to a complete cure where the parasites are no longer in or on the body.

Parasitic STBBIs include trichomoniasis (page 27).

# STBBIs AT A GLANCE

Sexually Transmitted Infection	TRANSMISSION		
	Unprotected Oral Sex	Unprotected Vaginal Sex	Unprotected Anal Sex
CHLAMYDIA	✓	✓	✓
GENITAL HERPES	✓	✓	✓
GONORRHEA	✓	✓	✓
HEPATITIS B	✓	✓	✓
HEPATITIS C (HCV)	✓ (if exchange of blood)	✓ (if exchange of blood)	✓ (if exchange of blood)
HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV)	✓	✓	✓
HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)	✓	✓	✓
SYPHILIS	✓	✓	✓
TRICHOMONIASIS	✓	✓	

Skin-Skin Contact with Infected Area Without Barrier	To Baby During Pregnancy and/or Delivery	Curable	Increases Risk of HIV Transmission
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓		
✓	✓		
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓
✓	✓	✓	✓

# CHLAMYDIA

Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STBBI in Canadian youth. It can infect the urethra (the tube that urine and semen pass through), cervix, rectum, throat, mouth, and eyes (in rare cases).

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- Vaginal discharge, vaginal bleeding between periods, abdominal pain, and/or pain when urinating
- Penile discharge, testicular pain, and/or pain when urinating
- Pain during sex
- Rectal pain, bleeding, and discharge



## How is it spread?

- Unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex
- If left untreated, can be passed to baby during delivery

## How do I get tested?

- A urine sample or swab of the infected area

## Can it be cured?

- Yes, antibiotics are available with a prescription.

## What happens if chlamydia is not treated?

- Can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can cause infertility (inability to have a baby), chronic pelvic pain, and ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside the uterus).
- Can cause swelling of the testicles, prostate, and scrotum; in rare cases it may lead to infertility.
- Can cause a rare condition called Reiter's Syndrome. Symptoms include rashes, sores, and arthritis-like joint pain.
- During pregnancy, there is a risk of miscarriage or preterm birth.
- A baby exposed to chlamydia during pregnancy and/or delivery may be born with low birth weight or develop eye or lung infections.

# GENITAL HERPES

Genital herpes is a viral infection caused by the herpes simplex virus type 1 (HSV-1) or type 2 (HSV-2). HSV-1 usually infects the mouth or lips but can also infect the genital area. HSV-2 usually infects the genital area. A person can be infected with both HSV-1 and HSV-2.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- Flu-like symptoms
- Small, painful, fluid-filled blisters or sores in the genital area

## How is it spread?

- Unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex
- Contact with the infected area (blisters, sores)
- To baby during pregnancy and/or delivery



## How do I get tested?

- A blood test or swab of blisters/sores during an outbreak

## Can it be cured?

- No, the virus remains in the body forever. Medication is available to reduce the severity and frequency of outbreaks. It is best to talk to a healthcare provider about options for treatment.

## What happens if herpes is not treated?

- Many people do not experience symptoms, and herpes does not have a major impact on their lives.
- In people with suppressed immune systems, genital herpes can cause rare but serious complications such as encephalitis (brain inflammation), meningitis (inflammation of the lining of the brain), and blindness.
- During pregnancy, genital herpes may cause miscarriage, preterm labour, or premature delivery. This is more likely with a new infection or an active outbreak.
- In rare cases, a baby exposed to a new infection or active outbreak during delivery may develop serious skin, eye, or mouth infections. This can result in serious infections that may lead to death. Early treatment can reduce harm to the baby.

# GONORRHEA

Gonorrhea is an STBBI caused by bacteria. It can infect the urethra (the tube that urine and semen pass through), cervix, rectum, throat, mouth, and eyes (in rare cases).

## Symptoms

- Most people with vaginas do not develop symptoms, but most people with penises do
- Vaginal discharge, vaginal bleeding between periods, abdominal pain, or pain when urinating
- Penile discharge, swelling or pain in testicles, or pain when urinating

## How is it spread?

- Unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex
- Skin-to-skin contact with the infected area; sharing sex toys
- If left untreated, can be passed to baby during delivery



## How do I get tested?

- A urine sample or swab of the infected area

## Can it be cured?

- Yes, antibiotics are available with a prescription.

## What happens if gonorrhea is not treated?

- Can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can cause infertility (inability to have a baby), chronic pelvic pain, and ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside the uterus).
- Can cause infection in the testicles.
- During pregnancy, there is a risk of miscarriage or preterm delivery.
- If a baby comes into contact with infected vaginal fluid during delivery, infection may occur. If infected, the baby may develop arthritis, meningitis (dangerous inflammations of the membrane surrounding the brain), sepsis (infection of the blood stream), or a severe eye disease that can lead to blindness.



# HEPATITIS B

Hepatitis B is a viral infection that causes inflammation of the liver.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- Tiredness, fever, abdominal pain, loss of appetite, jaundice (yellowing of the skin and eyes), or strange coloured urine or poop

## How is it spread?

- Contact with infected blood and body fluids, including semen, vaginal fluid, and saliva (rarely)
- In Canada, it is most often spread through unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex
- By sharing needles or personal items with infected blood (e.g., razor or a toothbrush)
- Without treatment, it can be passed to baby during pregnancy or delivery



## How do I get tested?

- A blood test

## Can it be cured?

- No, but the majority of people will clear the virus on their own and not require treatment.
- Others will develop chronic hepatitis B, which means the virus remains in their body forever. Medication is available to lower the viral load (the amount of virus in the blood), which reduces the chance of passing the virus and protects the liver from damage.
- Hepatitis B vaccine is available in Canada.

## What happens if hepatitis B is not treated?

- Chronic hepatitis B can cause cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver or liver cancer.
- Can affect sperm count, resulting in infertility.
- During pregnancy, there is a high risk of miscarriage and an increased risk of preterm labour.
- A baby exposed to hepatitis B during pregnancy and/or delivery may develop jaundice and/or fever. Of those babies that contract the virus, the majority will develop chronic hepatitis B. Medication can help prevent infection of the baby.

# HEPATITIS C (HCV)

Hepatitis C (HCV) is a liver disease caused by a virus.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- May experience loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting, jaundice (yellowing of eyes and skin), fatigue, fever, and/or strangely coloured urine or poop

## How is it spread?

- Exposure to blood that has the virus
- In Canada, most often spread through sharing equipment for injecting, smoking, or snorting drugs
- Getting a tattoo or piercing with unsterilized equipment
- Sharing a personal item that has infected blood on it, like a razor or a toothbrush
- Unprotected sex where blood may be present (e.g., anal sex, rough sex, period sex)



## How do I get tested?

- A blood test

## Can it be cured?

- Yes. Treatment cures over 95% of people with HCV. About one in four people can clear the virus on their own, but most people need treatment to cure HCV.
- Medication is also available to lower the viral load (the amount of virus in the blood). Lowering the viral load reduces the chance of passing the virus to others and protects from liver damage. A baby exposed to low levels of HCV is less likely to be infected.

## What happens if HCV is not treated?

- Chronic HCV can cause cirrhosis (scarring) of the liver or liver cancer.
- HCV progresses faster and causes more liver-related problems in people who are also living with HIV.

**Important: HVC can live outside of the body for many days. This means that even dried blood can transmit the virus.**

# HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV)

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is a virus that attacks a person's immune system, which is the part of the body that helps keep us healthy and protects against disease and illness.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- Can develop flu-like symptoms, fever, rash, joint pain, and/or enlarged lymph nodes within six weeks of becoming infected

## How is it spread?

- Through body fluids: blood, vaginal fluid, semen and pre-cum, anal fluid, and breast milk
- Unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex
- Sharing needles or other drug use equipment
- Getting a tattoo or piercing with unsterilized equipment
- Without treatment, can be spread to baby during pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding



## How do I get tested?

- A blood test

## Can it be cured?

- No, the virus remains in the body forever. However, medication is available to lower the viral load (amount of virus in the blood) to undetectable levels and reduce the damage caused. People who are on HIV medication and have undetectable viral loads cannot pass HIV to their sexual partners. The acronym U=U is commonly used to represent the idea that undetectable = untransmissible.
- PrEP and PEP can help prevent infection. See page 4 for more information.

## What happens if HIV is not treated?

- Causes damage to the immune system, making it too weak to fight off infections. People who are not treated can eventually become sick with life-threatening infections and will be diagnosed with AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).
- Babies infected with HIV may have poor growth; skin, chest, ear, or stomach infections; and developmental delays.

# HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is a virus with many different strains. Some strains cause genital warts and others can increase the risk for certain types of cancer. HPV is the most common STBBI in Canada; 75% of sexually active Canadians will have at least one HPV infection in their lifetime.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- May develop painless flesh-coloured bumps/warts on the vulva, vagina, cervix, rectum, penis, or scrotum
- Bumps/warts may re-appear at different times

## How is it spread?

- Unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex
- Skin-to-skin contact with infected areas; sharing sex toys
- Important: it can be spread even if warts are not visible
- Can be spread to baby during delivery (rare)



## How do I get tested?

- A physical examination, pap test (for people with vaginas)

## Can it be cured?

- No. In most cases, HPV goes away on its own and does not cause lasting health problems.
- There is no treatment for the virus, but there are treatments for the health problems that HPV can cause (e.g., genital warts and cancers caused by the virus).
- HPV vaccine is available in Canada. It is recommended that all youth receive this vaccine before becoming sexually active, but the vaccine can be beneficial at any age.

## What happens if HPV is not treated?

- If HPV does not go away on its own, it can cause health problems like cancers.
- If infection is extensive in the birth canal during delivery, a caesarian section may be recommended for delivery.
- Although rare, a baby exposed to HPV during delivery may develop genital HPV, oral HPV, or tumors that grow in the larynx.

# SYPHILIS

Syphilis is an STBBI caused by bacteria. There are four different stages of a syphilis infection: primary, secondary, latent, and tertiary. Syphilis is most infectious in the first two stages and, if left untreated, causes the most harm during the final two stages.

## Symptoms

- Often has no symptoms, or symptoms that are easy to miss because they are similar to other diseases/conditions
- Symptoms in the first two stages include painless sores at the site of infection (mouth, rectum, vagina, or penis); flu-like symptoms; hair loss; fever; headache; and/or rash on palms or soles of feet



## How is it spread?

- Through contact with a syphilitic sore or rash in the genital area or mouth
- Unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex; wet kissing; sharing sex toys
- If left untreated, it can be passed to baby during pregnancy or delivery

## How do I get tested?

- A blood test or swab of the infected area

## Can it be cured?

- Yes, antibiotics are available with a prescription. Early treatment is important. Treatment cannot undo any damage that has already been done.

## What happens if syphilis is not treated?

- Over time, it can cause damage to the heart, liver, brain, or eyes, and eventually cause death.
- During pregnancy, there is risk of miscarriage, premature birth, and low birth weight of newborn. Syphilis can be treated during pregnancy.
- A baby exposed to syphilis during pregnancy can develop congenital syphilis. Congenital syphilis can cause serious medical complications with the brain, eyes, ears, heart, skin, teeth or bones, or may cause death.

# TRICHOMONIASIS (TRICH)

Trichomoniasis is an STBBI caused by a parasite. These parasites may infect the vagina, foreskin, urethra (the tube that urine and semen pass through), bladder, or cervix.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- Foul-smelling vaginal discharge, vaginal pain during intercourse
- Penile discharge
- Pain when urinating

## How is it spread?

- Unprotected vaginal sex (penis to vagina or vulva contact)
- Sharing sex toys



## How do I get tested?

- A physical examination and swab if the infected area

## Can it be cured?

- Yes, antibiotics are available with a prescription.

## What happens if trich is not treated?

- Can cause infertility (ability to have a baby or get someone pregnant).
- Can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). PID can cause infertility (inability to have a baby), chronic pelvic pain, and ectopic pregnancy (a pregnancy outside the uterus).
- During pregnancy, there is a risk of premature rupture of membranes, preterm birth, and low birth weight of newborns.

## EFFECTS OF STBBIs ON PREGNANCY AND NEWBORN BABIES

In addition to affecting your own health, STBBIs can also affect fertility (the ability to have baby), future pregnancies, and newborn babies.

For example, certain STBBIs increase the risk of miscarriage, preterm labour and delivery, and/or birth defects. Newborns that have been exposed to STBBIs can have low birth weight, eye or lung infections, or more serious infections (e.g., meningitis). This is why it is important to be tested for STBBIs before and during pregnancy.

Treatment can greatly reduce the effects on the pregnancy and the newborn baby.

STBBI	Affects Fertility	Affects Pregnancy	Affects Newborn
CHLAMYDIA	✓	✓	✓
GENITAL HERPES		✓	✓
GONORRHEA	✓	✓	✓
HEPATITIS B	✓	✓	✓
HEPATITIS C (HCV)			✓
HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV)	✓	✓	✓
HUMAN PAPILLOMA VIRUS (HPV)			✓
SYPHILIS		✓	✓
TRICHOMONIASIS	✓	✓	✓

# OTHER CONDITIONS

The vagina has a natural balance of bacteria and yeast that helps it stay clean and healthy. Sometimes these bacteria and yeast can get out of balance, which may cause an infection. These infections are not STBBIs, but they are more common in people who are sexually active and can have similar symptoms to STBBIs. If you are experiencing discomfort, it is important to see a healthcare provider for testing and treatment.

## Prevention

You can help prevent these infections by practicing good hygiene. The vagina (internal) is self-cleaning, but the vulva can be cleaned with water or unscented soap. Avoid using scented products on your vulva and avoid douching (flushing the vagina with water).

## Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)

Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is caused by an imbalance of healthy bacteria in the vagina. It is not an STI, but unprotected sex with a new partner or multiple partners can increase the risk of BV. There is a higher risk of BV during pregnancy due to hormonal changes.

## Symptoms

- Often no symptoms
- Thin vaginal discharge that may be white, gray, greenish, or foamy
- Fishy smell that becomes more noticeable after sex
- Itching / burning feeling when urinating or around the vulva

## How is it spread?

- Occurs naturally
- Unprotected sex, sharing sex toys, douching, and using perfumed products and strong soaps can change vaginal pH and allow bacteria to grow
- Partners with a penis will not require treatment, but partners with a vagina should get tested and treated

## How do I get tested?

- Swab of vaginal discharge

## Can it be cured?

- Yes, antibiotics are available.
- Do not have sex until you finish treatment.

## What happens if BV is not treated?

- Higher risk of getting STBBIs.
- Can cause pregnancy problems, including premature birth or low birth weight of a newborn.

## **Yeast Infections**

Vaginal yeast infections are caused by an overgrowth of the fungus candida. It is not an STI because it can occur without having sex.

### **Symptoms**

- Itchiness in and around the vagina
- Burning, redness, and swelling of the vagina and vulva
- Pain when urinating or during sex
- Thick, white vaginal discharge that does not have a bad smell

### **How is it spread?**

- Occurs naturally
- Vaginal, anal, or oral sex
- Sharing sex toys

### **How do I get tested?**

- Pelvic exam to look for swelling and discharge
- Swab of vaginal discharge

### **Can it be cured?**

- Yes. Antifungal medications are available without prescription, but it is recommended that a full test for STBBIs be done to rule out other potential causes.
- Pregnant people should not take oral antifungal medications, which have been linked to birth defects and increased risk of miscarriage.

### **What happens if a yeast infection is not treated?**

- Infection may get worse and may lead to other health problems such as skin infections and gastrointestinal problems.



## FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT STBBIs:

### KIS-SK

#### Keep It Safe Saskatchewan

This smart phone app provides information to help you make healthy choices and informed decisions about your sexual health.

You can find more information about STBBIs, free contraceptives, and STBBI testing sites in Saskatchewan.



GET IT ON  
Google Play

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App Store

### CATIE

CATIE is Canada's official knowledge broker for HIV, hepatitis C, sexual health, and harm reduction. CATIE provides education and resources on prevention, treatment, and care of STBBIs.

[www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

### SEX & U

Sex & U is a comprehensive resource for Canadians seeking information on sexual and reproductive health. The site is an initiative of the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, Canada's leading authority on sexual and reproductive health.

[www.sexandu.ca](http://www.sexandu.ca)

**LEARN THE FACTS ABOUT HOW  
STBBIs ARE SPREAD.**

**PROTECT YOURSELF AND OTHERS.**

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