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SYDNEY ABOARD THE MAGNIFICENT 77,000 TON &

IT SAFE ...AT ANY AGE For many people, sexual health concerns are something they relate as being more important for a particular demographic it can be easy to think you fall into a more 'low-risk' category. But as Rebecca Howden writes, it is important that everyone is aware of the dangers, precautions, and treatment options available.

**PLAYING** 

inding new love and enjoying sexual relationships can be a wonderful time of personal and sexual discovery. When you have just come out of a long-term relationship, the dating game can feel like a whole new world, full of exciting opportunities for growth and experimentation, and new kinds of happiness that should be embraced.

During this time, however, it's important to make sure you are looking after your sexual health. Most public sexual health awareness campaigns are targeted towards teenagers and young adults, so it can be easy to forget that sexually transmitted infections (STIs) affect everyone, no matter your age, demographic or sexual orientation. Particularly when pregnancy is not a concern – for example, if the woman is on the contraceptive pill, or can no longer conceive, or if the man has had a vasectomy it may not even cross your mind that condoms are necessary. And if you have just come out of a long-term monogamous relationship, safe sex may not be something you've had to think about for years.

Anyone who is or has been sexually active can have an STI, possibly without even knowing they are infected. According to the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, more than 1 in 10 Australians carry the virus responsible for genital herpes, and reported cases of chlamydia have quadrupled in the last ten years. Although it is true that three-quarters of reported cases occur in people aged between 15 and 29 years, new research has suggested that rates of STIs in adults in their 30s, 40s and 50s are rising as well.

A study conducted by researchers at Family Planning NSW and the University of Sydney in 2011 suggested increasing divorce rates and the growing popularity of internet dating sites might partially explain the rising occurrence of STIs

in older Australian women. "We found that women over 40 were more likely to agree to unprotected sex with a new partner, particularly if they have been out of the dating game for a while," says Dr Deborah Bateson, medical director at Family Planning NSW and one of the lead researchers in the study. With this in mind, it's important to be aware of the risks and take steps to protect yourself whenever you embark on a new sexual relationship.

### **KNOW THE RISKS**

To start with, it's a good idea to refresh your knowledge of STIs to ensure you have accurate information. "There are a lot of myths that can make people very anxious about STIs, whereas if they have factual information, they realise they can be more in control," says Dr Bateson.

STIs are infections that are passed on through the exchange of bodily fluids, including semen, blood, vaginal secretions and sometimes saliva. This means that any time you engage in any sexual activity without protection, you are at risk.

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There are two main classifications of STIs - bacterial and viral. Infections caused by bacteria, such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea and syphilis, are common and can be treated quite easily. However, if they are left untreated they can lead to serious and painful health problems, from infertility to cancer, so treating them early is vital. Some STIs caused by viruses, including herpes, HPV (human papilloma virus) and hepatitis B, cannot be cured, but the symptoms can be managed.

Dr Bateson says it is important to remember that HIV (human immunodeficiency virus, which can lead to AIDS) is also a risk for everyone not only for homosexual men, as many people mistakenly believe. While treatments for HIV are improving, there is still no cure.

One of the most common myths surrounding STIs is that you will always be able to tell if another person has one. "Most STIs are silent they don't have symptoms – so that's certainly not the case," Dr Bateson says. In fact, many people who have an STI may not even know they are infected. With many STIs, symptoms don't show for months or even years, so even if you are in a long-term relationship now, you or your partner may have been infected in a previous relationship without knowing. The only way to know for sure is to get tested.

### **HOW TO STAY SAFE**

It's important that you feel relaxed and comfortable when you're having sex - and part of that may well be the confidence of knowing you are taking control of your sexual health. Have a conversation with your partner to understand each other's sexual history, and explain why you feel it's important to use condoms and/or to be tested. Wanting to use protection doesn't mean you don't trust your partner – anyone who has had previous sexual contact can have an STI, even if they have only had one or two previous partners. Getting tested gives you the knowledge you need to move forward with confidence.

## Using condoms

Sexual health experts agree that the best way to protect yourself while having sex is to use condoms. While they are not 100% effective, they do offer the best available protection when used correctly, and should be used every time you have sex, for the entire sex act.

It might seem obvious – but it is important that you know how to use the condom properly to make sure it is effective, as it may have been vears since you last had to use one. This includes making sure the condom is not past the useby date. Using a lubricating product can help facilitate smooth movement, which not only makes sex feel more comfortable, but also helps reduce the risk of the condom breaking. Make sure you use a water-based lubricant, though – oil-based products like Vaseline and massage oil actually weaken the latex, making the condom more likely to leak or break.

#### Getting tested

Dr Bateson emphasises that getting tested should be an important part of your sexual health strategy. "If you have any concerns at allwhether it's because you think you may have been exposed to an STI, or you have a symptom that you think might be an STI, or because a partner has told you that they've been diagnosed with an STI – it's important to go and see a doctor or a sexual health clinic," she says. It's also a good idea for you and your partner to get tested whenever you embark on a new sexual relationship, to give both of you peace of mind moving forward, even if there are no symptoms of an STI.

"Often, people feel very anxious about the testing, but in fact it's often a matter of a simple urine test or sometimes a self-collected swab," Dr Bateson says. Your doctor will discuss any symptoms you might have and may ask you a few questions about your sexual history. This is a normal process that will help them to work out which tests you should have, so it's important to be honest, even if it feels a bit embarrassing. Tell your doctor if you have had unsafe sex, or have experienced any symptoms such as pain, unusual discharge or itching in the genital area.

The results of your STI test are confidential, though they will be stored in your medical files, and all notifiable diseases - including chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and HIV are recorded by relevant health departments for statistical purposes.



Ansell Zero Condoms (8-pack \$8.99, members \$7.19) Lifestyles Regular 12 (\$7.25, members \$5.80) KY Jelly Lubricant (50g Tube \$6.99, members \$5.59) Sylk Personal Lubricant (40ml \$12.75, members \$10.20)

## **COMMON STI SYMPTOMS**

Some common symptoms that could indicate an STI are:

- Itching in and around the genital area
- A burning sensation when urinating
- Unusual discharge from the penis, vagina or anus
- Pain and swelling in the testicles
- A rash, sores or small lumps on or around the genital area
- Unusual bleeding from the vagina
- Pain during sex
- Sore throat, swollen glands, fever or body aches
- Unexplained fatigue, night sweats and weight loss

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, see your doctor. Remember, it is also possible to have an STI with no symptoms at all – testing is the only way to know for sure. Each STI is different and symptoms will differ for each type.

# WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE AN STI

If you think you may have contracted an STI, it's important that you see a doctor as soon as possible. If you do test positive, your doctor will talk with you about the infection and the sort of treatments involved. Be sure to let your recent sexual partner or partners know so that they can be tested too one of them may have passed it onto you without knowing.

Bacterial STIs such as chlamydia and gonorrhoea can be easily treated with antibiotics. Make sure you complete your full course of treatment and continue to use condoms after the infection has cleared. Some STIs such as herpes and genital warts cannot be cured, but they can be managed to reduce your symptoms. Always talk to your doctor if you have any questions or concerns about your treatment.