

Talking with a Partner About STI Testing

Some people find it difficult to talk about their sexual health. But discomfort and shame can keep people from taking good care of themselves and their partners. Remember that protecting yourself against STIs can reduce anxiety and make sex more enjoyable.

DO YOUR RESEARCH

If you or your partner(s) have had unprotected sex, it is important to be tested. Some people have a difficult time bringing up the subject of testing, so read the following suggestions as you prepare to talk about tests with your partner(s).

UNDERSTAND THE RISK

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are also called sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). They are transmitted through body fluids: vaginal secretion, semen, blood, breast milk, and saliva. A common misconception is that the only way to get an STI is by having intercourse. This is not true! STIs can be transmitted without having intercourse. For example, skin-to-skin contact or genital rubbing can transmit HPV and the herpes virus.

ASSESS YOUR RISK

There are many reasons to be tested for STIs. A few of the reasons are listed here.

- Are you entering a new relationship?
- Have you had an unprotected sexual experience?
- Did you find out that a current or former sex partner has an STI?

Your answers to these questions may help you and your primary care provider decide whether or not you need to be tested.

TALK WITH YOUR PRIMARY CARE PROVIDER

At UHS, all full-time students have a primary care provider. To schedule an appointment, call 275-2662. Bring a list of questions with you to make sure that all of your questions are answered.

CHOOSE A PLACE TO BE TESTED

University of Rochester students can be tested for STIs at the University Health Service (UHS). Call 275-2662 to make an appointment. See "STI Testing" for additional testing sites in the Rochester area. Because many STIs do not have symptoms, it can be difficult to recognize an infection at an early and easily treatable stage. If you think you have been exposed to an STI, talk with your primary care provider about getting tested.

TALKING WITH YOUR PARTNER

Consider your own comfort level in discussing STIs. Do you want to talk about getting tested right at the beginning of your relationship, or do you want to wait until you become sexually active? Do you want to ask your partner(s) if they have ever been tested or do you want to suggest you both get tested regardless? The opening question can be difficult. To break the ice, you might say something like:

- I really care about you, so there's something I want both of us to do.
- We've been dating for a while and I think we're ready to take the next step together.
- Before we have sex, we need to talk about some things, like STIs and contraception.

You do not have to talk in depth about former partners or sexual experiences. Instead you should focus on your current relationship and how getting tested can increase trust. You and your partner(s) can choose to be tested at the same time or you can make your own appointments and agree to talk about the results later on. Choose the option that is comfortable for the both of you.

WHAT IF THE TEST RESULT IS NEGATIVE?

Just because you test negative for STIs does not mean you should stop practicing safer sex. If you are in a mutually monogamous relationship, and you have both been tested, you and your partner need to decide what's right for you. If you are not in a mutually monogamous relationship, assume there is a risk of STI exposure. The most effective way to prevent STIs is to always use a condom or other latex barriers. Unless you are planning a pregnancy, contraception should also be used.

Another concern is that STI tests like HIV can give false negative results if you are tested too close to your exposure. During your test appointment, your health care provider will be able to determine whether you will need to be tested again later.

WHAT IF THE TEST RESULT IS POSITIVE?

It is completely normal to be afraid to tell a partner about having an STI, but honesty is important for both of your health status. Remind yourself that you would want your partner to tell you if s/he had an STI. Do not let fear keep you from being responsible.

First, have you come to terms yourself with having an STI? If not, then it is unrealistic to expect another person to understand. How well informed are you? Do you know how to reduce the risk to your partner? Do you know the facts about your infection? You want to feel confident and knowledgeable before you can explain the infection to someone else.

The more you know about your STI, the more you can relieve your partner's fears. You'll be able to tell your partner the facts and correct any misinformation they may have about STIs. You might want to have a book or pamphlets with information about your particular STI on hand. There are many information sheets on the UHS web site.

Here are some suggestions that you could use when you decide to tell your partner about your infection:

- Pick a time when both of you will be in reasonably good moods and relaxed for this conversation.
- Choose a place with few, if any, distractions.
- Your delivery can influence the reaction and acceptance of what you say. If you can stay calm when talking about your STI, your partner may be able to stay calm, too.
- Allow a conversation to take place, rather than doing all of the talking yourself.
- If you can, direct the conversation to include not only your particular STI, but general STIs, STI prevention, and birth control.
- Encourage your partner to ask questions and share feelings and thoughts. Let your partner know you are concerned and that want to find a way to make your relationship work, if they are.
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- Expect to need to talk about this topic more than once before things are resolved.
- After you have said what you need to say, be aware that you will not be able to control your partner's reaction. Your partner may need time alone at first, or your partner might want to end the relationship. On the other hand, your partner might take the news fairly well.
- Whatever the reaction, realize your partner has a right to his/her feelings and may need time to sort those feelings.

It takes a great deal of courage to be able to tell others about your STI, especially a new partner. In general, people with STIs find that with time and a better understanding of the infection, telling new partners becomes easier. They often discover that STIs do not affect their intimate relationships and sex lives as much as they originally feared.

If you find yourself overwhelmed with negative thoughts about having an STI, you may find it helpful to use the links below to find a support group or a counselor to help you work through your feelings.

LINKS

For more information about STIs, you can visit:

itsyoursexlife.com
http://www.itsyoursexlife.com/comm_sub2.html

iwannaknow.org
<http://www.iwannaknow.org/prevention/safersex.html>