

Travel Guard® Health Advisory

Travelers and Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Implications and Prevention

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) remain a critical public health issue. Globally, more than one million people are infected every day. Likewise, there are an estimated 357 million new infections each year, with one of four STDs: chlamydia, gonorrhoea, syphilis and trichomoniasis.* Travelers are particularly vulnerable, due to voluntary or involuntary sexual behavior while abroad.

What are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

STDs can be spread from person to person and are caused by over 30 different bacteria, viruses and parasites. Some are spread by skin-to-skin contact, and others are spread through semen, vaginal fluid, blood or other body fluids.

What is my risk?

STDs are present worldwide. The risk is dependent on behavior while traveling, rather than the region or country of visit. Risk is higher among travelers who engage in:

- Unprotected sex
- Casual and/or anonymous sex
- Sexual activity with sex trade workers

How are they transmitted?

- STDs are spread from person to person through:
 - Semen, vaginal fluid, blood or other body fluids during unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex
 - Skin-to-skin contact during sexual activity
- Some STDs can also be passed from person to person through blood transfusions and organ transplants. In some countries, blood or organ supply might not be adequately screened, which increases the risk of virus transmission.
- Some STDs, as well as infections transmitted through blood (such as hepatitis C), can also be passed from person to person through the sharing of needles and other equipment during injection drug use.
- Some STDs, such as HIV, syphilis and herpes simplex virus (HSV), can be transmitted from an infected mother to her child through pregnancy and childbirth. HIV can also be transmitted through breastfeeding.
- An individual can have more than one STD at a time. In fact, having an untreated STD, such as chlamydia or syphilis, increases the risk of getting or transmitting HIV.
- With some STDs, such as chlamydia or syphilis, an individual can get them more than once if exposed again.



What are the symptoms?

- Some people with STDs have few or no symptoms at all; others have obvious symptoms. If an individual has been sexually active with a new partner when traveling, be aware of any changes in health during travel and after return, such as:
 - Different or heavier vaginal discharge
 - Penile discharge
 - Burning sensation when urinating
 - Sores, particularly in the genital or anal areas
 - Itch around the genitals or anus
 - Appearance of a rash
 - Swollen glands in the groin
 - Sudden onset of flu-like symptoms

These symptoms might appear alone or in combination.

- There can be complications that can have serious effects on health, such as pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, pregnancy complications, cancer (of the cervix, vulva, vagina, anus or penis), chronic degenerative disease of the liver, and/or birth defects in children.

Can sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) be treated?

Management and treatment vary depending on the infection. Some STDs can be cured while others may remain as life-long infections. Early detection and treatment are important to help prevent long-term health effects and reduce the spread of infection.

Recommendations

Consult a healthcare provider or visit a travel health clinic preferably six weeks before travel. The most effective way to avoid becoming infected with or transmitting an STD is to avoid sexual activity or other activities where bodily fluids are exchanged. Risk may be minimized by following the recommendations below:

1. Practice safe sex:

- Always use latex or polyurethane male or female condoms correctly for every sexual contact.
- Use dental dams (rectangular pieces of thin latex) over the vagina or anus for a protective barrier during oral sex.
- Before traveling, pack your own supply of high quality condoms and dental dams.
- Other birth control methods do NOT protect one against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

2. Talk to a health care provider or visit a travel health clinic to discuss the benefits of getting vaccinated against:

- Human Papillomavirus (HPV)
- Hepatitis A and B

3. Avoid behavior that may increase the risk of STDs, such as:

- Unprotected sex (anal, oral, vaginal).
- Sexual activity with commercial sex workers and/or strangers.
- Heavy partying, drinking or taking illegal drugs, which can lower sexual inhibitions or alter the ability to make decisions.
- Sharing needles, syringes, razors, toothbrushes or shavers.
- Exposure to unsterilized needles for tattooing, body-piercing or acupuncture.

4. Avoid injections, blood transfusions and organ transplants unless it is an emergency:

- If you must receive blood or an organ while traveling, make sure that the donated blood/organ has been tested for HIV and other infections transmitted through blood.
- If unable to ensure the blood/organ has been screened, and emergency care is not required, return home for treatment.

5. Be aware of sexual violence:

- Occurrence of sexual violence varies around the world.
- If raped or assaulted, get medical attention immediately so HIV and STD testing and counseling (and possible treatment) can be provided, as appropriate.

6. Get tested and monitor signs of health risks:

- See a health care provider if the following occur:
 - Suspects having an STD with symptoms.
 - Has engaged in activities that may have placed him/her at risk for an STD, even if there is no symptom.
 - Suspects that he/she has been exposed to HIV infection. See a healthcare provider immediately to get tested, counseled and treated as appropriate.
- It is important to ensure that all sex partners receive treatment if an individual is infected.

References

- [World Health Organization, WHO](http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs110/en/)
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