



STDs and Oral Health

What are common STDs of the mouth, the symptoms, and treatments?

Common STDs of the Mouth

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) can be contracted through several forms of sexual activity, including oral sex. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 1 in 5 people have an STD on any given day. The risk of throat cancer increases if a sexually transmitted disease, such as human papilloma virus (HPV), is left untreated. Therefore, it is essential to have an open communication with your partner, doctor, and dentist about STDs to ensure any disease is treated.

Common STDs That Can be Transmitted Through Oral Sex:

- **Human Papilloma Virus (HPV):** This virus is contracted through skin-to-skin contact, usually presenting few symptoms outside of warts and lesions. Though there is no cure for HPV, the body's immune system can sometimes help clear the virus. Luckily, an HPV vaccine is available as a safe, effective, and lasting protection against HPV infections that most commonly cause cancer. The CDC recommends the HPV vaccine as a routine vaccination at age 11 or 12 years.

HPV has several strains (high- and low-risk strains) that can affect the mouth and throat.
 - Head and Neck- HPV high-risk strains have been associated with head and neck cancer. The virus generally develops in the throat and can go undetected, as symptoms are often unnoticeable.
 - Mouth warts- HPV low-risk strains cause warts or lesions in the mouth. Aside from the physical appearance, they are painless, though may need to be surgically removed.
- **Herpes:** The herpes virus has two strains which are highly contagious, with no cure for either strain:
 - Herpes simplex virus type 1 is associated with mouth lesions and cold sores.
 - Herpes simplex virus type 2 is associated with genital lesions.

Both herpes strains can be contracted through saliva and coming in contact with an open sore (kissing or oral sex). Symptoms generally go away after 7-10 days.



Communication Openly with Your Partner About STDs

Practice open communication with these topics:

- Learn about the facts of STDs and encourage questions from your partner.
- Discuss risk factors and get tested together before having sex.
- Create a list of protections and barriers to be used against STDs.
- Agree to practice safe sex.
- Discuss sexual history regarding the number of partners and STD history.

Knowledge is power, the more you know, the better prepared you are to protect yourself and your partner from contracting an STD. Having an open communication with your partner about STDs shows that you care!

- **Syphilis:** Syphilis is a bacterial infection that is treatable and can be cured with antibiotics if detected in its early stages. Syphilis can be contracted through sexual activities such as oral, vaginal, or anal sex. It can also be transmitted through pregnancy from an infected mother to the unborn baby. Symptoms include small red patches that can grow into larger, open sores, appearing to be red, yellow or gray in color. According to the CDC, the bacterial infection is broken down to four stages of symptoms:
 - *Primary Stage-* the presence of round single or multiple sores that can be painless. The sore generally goes away between three to six weeks. Treatment is highly recommended at this stage; if left untreated, symptoms will proceed to the Secondary Stage.
 - *Secondary Stage-* this stage usually starts with a rash on one or more areas of your body and/or mucous membrane lesions in the vagina, mouth, or anus. The rash may appear as red or reddish-brown spots and may not itch. Other symptoms can include headaches and muscle aches, exhaustion, sore throat, fever, swollen lymph glands, and weight loss. Stage two symptoms may go away on their own. Treatment is highly recommended at this stage; if left untreated, symptoms will proceed to Latent Stage.
 - *Latent Stage-* the latent stage reveals no signs; the syphilis bacteria continue to remain in the body for years. A person infected with syphilis is contagious during the early Latent Stage and can continue to be contagious without showing any obvious signs. Treatment is highly recommended at this stage; if left untreated, symptoms will proceed to the final stage, Tertiary Stage.
 - *Tertiary Stage-* Tertiary Stage is very serious and can leave one in critical condition, resulting in death. While not everyone with untreated syphilis will reach Tertiary Stage, the symptoms will occur 10-30 years after primary stage and damage different organs: heart, brain, and nervous systems.
- **Epstein Barr Virus (EBV):** The Epstein Barr Virus is commonly known as “Mono” and is transmitted primarily through saliva: kissing, sharing the same utensils, food and drinks. Children can contract mono by sharing toys with other infected children who drooled on the toy.

Symptoms include sore throat, rash, fatigue, and swollen lymph nodes in the neck and armpits. Mono cannot be cured; however, the symptoms can be alleviated with plenty of rest, staying hydrated, and taking over the counter medications for fever and aches.
- **Gonorrhea:** Gonorrhea is a bacterial infection that is transmitted through oral, vaginal and anal sex. Similar to other STDs, Gonorrhea symptoms can go unnoticed; symptoms include white spots in the mouth, sore throat, and swollen glands. Over the counter medications and home remedies will not treat this bacterial infection. A person must seek medical attention for antibiotics.

Are Oral STDs Treatable?

Some STDs can be treated with antibiotics; symptoms such as aches, pain, and fever may be treated with plenty of rest, staying hydrated, and over the counter medication. However, there are several viral STDs that are serious and cannot be cured, such as Herpes. Since STDs may not always show significant symptoms, it is important to be conscious of sexual activities involving the oral cavity. Untreated STDs can cause long-term damage to the heart and brain and increase risk to cancer. Be sure to self-exam and visit your dentist regularly.



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