

# WELLNESS

## 5 MYTHS ABOUT

# STIs

Sex can help you share feelings of love and intimacy. But there is new information about the not-so-nice things it may spread.

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GETTY IMAGES.

# 1

### MYTH:

**If you've contracted an STI, you'll know.**

### MYTHBUSTER

**While most sexually transmitted infections (STIs) manifest through classic symptoms** such as blisters, discharge, and painful sex, a few signifiers are subtle. "Syphilis in particular may go unnoticed," says Rebecca Masutani, M.D., a geriatrician at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York City. But cases are rising, and a painless sore or swollen lymph glands may be an early sign. One STI symptom that's often misinterpreted: "If you're having discomfort with urination, a practitioner may think *UTI* instead of *STI*," Dr. Masutani

says. "But that can also be a symptom of chlamydia." A common bacterial STI, chlamydia can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease in women if left untreated, and that can damage the reproductive organs. AIDS is not always immediately obvious either. "It may first present as flu-like symptoms," says Jonathan Appelbaum, M.D., past chair of the board of the American Academy of HIV Medicine. "But many people may have very mild symptoms or none." Your doctor might not ask, so tell them if you've noticed changes, and be sure to bring up STIs specifically.

2

**MYTH:****Older people are unlikely to get STIs.****MYTHBUSTER**

**Not so.** In fact, rates of new STIs in people 55 and older (specifically chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis) more than doubled between 2012 and 2022. Why? People are living longer than they used to, which means they have more opportunities for sexual intimacy, and they're staying sexually active longer thanks to hormone replacement therapy (which helps with vaginal dryness) and erectile-dysfunction drugs. At the same time, older people are less likely to use condoms than younger folks, in part because they associate condoms with preventing pregnancy, not STIs. "When condoms are used correctly, they are as close to 100% effective as you can get in preventing transmission of STIs, including HIV," says Dr. Appelbaum.

3

**MYTH:****Your health care provider will test for STIs automatically.****MYTHBUSTER****Some practitioners may not ask you if you want to be screened, especially if you're married or older.**

"We train medical students to normalize asking all ages about sexual habits, but older physicians might not bring up STI testing as often because of age bias," Dr. Appelbaum says. If you're unsure whether you should be tested, raise the topic

yourself. "I appreciate the honesty, since it can help avoid complications down the road," Dr. Masutani says. Most STI testing is done via urine tests or swabs, and there are FDA-approved home kits to look for chlamydia, gonorrhea, trichomoniasis, and HIV, though insurance may

not cover them; Dr. Masutani says it's best to see your health care provider. For detecting HIV, blood tests from a health care provider are most accurate, says Dr. Appelbaum, "but home HIV tests are better than no test at all."



LUCKY IF SHARP.



TRUNK ARCHIVE

## 4

**MYTH:**

**Treating an STI is pretty straightforward.**

**MYTHBUSTER**

**Not necessarily, especially for those who are a bit older.**

Antibiotics are usually the standard treatment, but as people age, they're more likely to be on medications that can interfere with those. Statins for high cholesterol and blood pressure meds can interact with certain antibiotics, making all the drugs less effective or resulting in unsafe levels of them in the blood, says Dr. Masutani. Another issue is if a person has some degree of kidney or liver disease. "These organs are important in metabolizing medications, so the

provider must dose appropriately based on kidney and liver function," she says. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) drugs, for people with HIV, can interfere

with antibiotics too, and vice versa. No matter what your age, make sure that your doctor is aware of all the medications you are taking.

## 5

**MYTH:**

**You can't have safe sex with someone who is HIV-positive.**

**MYTHBUSTER**

**Actually you can, if their treatment is working: "If a person with HIV is on ART and as a result their viral load is so low that it's undetectable, they cannot transmit HIV, period,"** says Dr. Appelbaum. (ART prevents the virus from replicating in cells.) In the past, condoms were the main HIV-prevention tool, but today there is also preventative medication to stop HIV from taking hold, and if someone does contract HIV, they have a better chance of living longer thanks to ART, improved management of HIV-related illness, and early detection. Still, many cases go undiagnosed; if you engage in unprotected sex with a new partner whose status you don't know, you should be tested. There are about 32,000 new HIV infections in the U.S. each year, and, says Dr. Appelbaum, "about 10% are in people 50 and older."