



Preconception and Sexually Transmitted Infections

Sexually transmitted infections (STI's) are serious illnesses that require treatment, regardless of whether or not you are pregnant. However, when you ARE pregnant, you are not the only one at risk; many STI's can be especially harmful to both you and your baby.

Both you and your partner must be aware of the harmful effects of STI's and know how to protect yourselves and your children against infection.

No signs, no symptoms, no worries – NOT QUITE!

A person may be unaware they have an STI as there are often no symptoms, and some symptoms that do appear may mimic certain pregnancy symptoms. Routine testing, even in the absence of any STI symptoms, should be performed.

How can STI's affect my pregnancy and the health of my baby?

Different STI's pose different health risks for pregnant women and their babies, but effects can include:

- Infertility.
- Pelvic inflammatory disease.
- Ectopic pregnancy (the fertilized egg implants itself outside of the uterus).
- Miscarriages.
- Pelvic pain.
- Cervical cancer.

STI's can also be passed from a pregnant woman to the baby before, during or after delivery, increasing the risk of:

- Stillbirth (a baby that is born dead).

- Low birth weight.
- Eye infections.
- Pneumonia (lung infection).
- Neonatal sepsis (infection in the baby's blood stream).
- Neurologic damage (brain damage).
- Blindness or deafness.
- Meningitis (inflammation of the membranes around the brain and spinal cord).

When it comes to STI's, the best treatment is prevention. Be sure to undergo routine screening for STI's and always practice safe sex.

Here is a list of some STI's and the threats they pose to a healthy pregnancy.

Genital Herpes

Herpes infection in a pregnant woman is relatively safe until she gets ready to deliver. Any lesions that are exposed near the vaginal opening during delivery could cause the disease to be passed on to the infant. That is why many women with herpes or other genital warts choose to deliver via a cesarean section. There is no cure for genital herpes and often people will have reoccurring outbreaks. Sores can be on the external genital area and/or internal areas (cervical, urethral, oral or rectal).



Chlamydia

Chlamydia is the most common bacterial STI. Symptoms may include genital burning or itching, vaginal discharge or painful urination. However, there may be no symptoms. Mothers affected by Chlamydia are at an increased risk of miscarriage and preterm delivery. Furthermore, if the baby is exposed to the disease during delivery, he or she could be at risk for eye infections or pneumonia.

Human Papilloma Virus (HPV)

Genital warts resulting from HPV usually take the form of itchy, cauliflower-like clusters. They can grow anywhere around the genitals, but most commonly occur on the outer folds of the vagina. These warts may enlarge during pregnancy due to hormones and increased blood flow to

the genital area. Unlike some other STI's, treatment for HPV will likely be postponed until after giving birth. However, if the warts grow large enough to block the birth canal, the baby may need to be delivered by a cesarean section. Vaccinations to protect against certain strains of HPV are now available.

Syphilis

Because syphilis is a viral infection, it can be easily passed along from mother to child, which can pose a variety of very serious risks, including fatality. Babies that do survive are often born prematurely and tend to have birth defects affecting their brain, eyes, ears, skin, heart and bones. Syphilis is curable with antibiotics in the early stages. Doctors or clinics usually do a syphilis test at the first visit of every pregnant woman.

Gonorrhea

This bacteria starts in your vagina and can spread upward to your cervix, uterus and ovaries. If contracted during pregnancy, gonorrhea can cause vaginal discharge and a burning sensation during urination. However, there may be no symptoms. Left untreated, pregnant women with gonorrhea are at an



increased risk of miscarriage and premature birth. Gonorrhea can be treated with antibiotics. If the infection is present at the time of birth the baby may be born blind, or with a joint or blood infection.

HIV/AIDS

The HIV virus is passed through semen, vaginal fluid and infected blood. An HIV

positive person can pass the virus to others including mother to baby. However, due to recent medical advancements in HIV/AIDS research, transmission of HIV/AIDS from mother to child has become almost completely preventable. That said, without treatment it is likely the baby will be born with the virus, which can cause AIDS and eventually death.

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