



# The 5 W's of STI Testing

## Who, What, When, Where, Why & How

Thinking about STIs can be uncomfortable and scary. However, if you are sexually active (or have been in the past) or you are thinking about becoming sexually active, it is important to be aware of your risks and know how to keep you and your partner (s) safer. This article is intended to provide you with information regarding STIs, testing and safer sex practices.

### What is a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI)?

An STI can be in the form of a bacteria, virus or parasite. These infections are passed from one person to another during sexual contact. An STI can be transmitted during vaginal, oral or anal sex. **Vaginal sex** occurs when a penis or sex toy is placed in a vagina (or near a vaginal opening), or when vaginas are rubbed against one another. **Oral sex** occurs when a person places her or his mouth on another person's genitals or anus. **Anal sex** occurs when a penis or sex toy is placed in one's anus.

Some STIs are passed through fluids such as semen and vaginal secretions, while others are passed through direct skin-to-skin contact of the genital area (any area of the skin that a pair of boxer shorts would cover). *Keep in mind that sexual contact is not the only way to spread STIs. STIs can be passed through breastfeeding and vaginal deliveries and also through sharing needles, toothbrushes, razors, drug injection equipment, etc.*

Bacterial Infections are **curable** with antibiotics. They include:

- Chlamydia
- Gonorrhea
- Syphilis
- LGV

Viral Infections are **non-curable** (you will have the virus for life), but the symptoms can be treated. They include:

- HIV/AIDS
- Hepatitis B
- Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV) 1 & 2
- Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

*(HPV is responsible for genital warts, abnormal cervical cells & cervical cancer)*

## **Why Does a Person Need to be Tested for STIs?**

If you are sexually active or have been in the past, you are at risk of an STI. Even if you have always used protection (condoms), you still have a chance of contracting an STI. Condoms offer good protection against infections that are passed through fluids. However, condoms only protect up to 50% with infections that are passed through genital skin-to-skin contact (boxer short area). Please keep in mind that there is no such thing as 100% safe sex -- Condoms will NOT offer perfect protection.

Also, the majority of people who have an STI have no way of knowing they are infected because most infected people are asymptomatic (experiencing no symptoms). Therefore, a person cannot examine their genital area to see if they are infected. The **ONLY** way for a person to know if they are infected is to get testing from a doctor.

**To recap, if you are or have been sexually active, protected or not, you need to be tested for STIs on a regular basis!**

## **When Does a Person Need to be Tested for STIs?**

A person needs to have STI testing on a yearly basis once they become sexually active. However, if you are changing sexual partners frequently, you should be getting testing more frequently. Also, if you are entering into a new relationship, it is beneficial for both you and your new partner to get testing together before becoming sexually active. After the initial STI testing in the new relationship, it is still a healthy practice to continue screening for STIs on a yearly basis. Keep in mind that open communication is the key to a healthy relationship. You have to be open with your partner when dealing with sex. You need to be aware of the risks involved and take the appropriate steps to keep you and your partner(s) as safe as possible.

In between your regular screening, if you experience any unusual symptoms in the genital area (pain, discharge, itching, growths, sores, etc.) please see a doctor immediately before the symptoms disappear. **Keep in mind that for certain infections (herpes & warts) you need to be experiencing an outbreak for a doctor to test and diagnose these STIs.**

## **Who Needs to be Tested?**

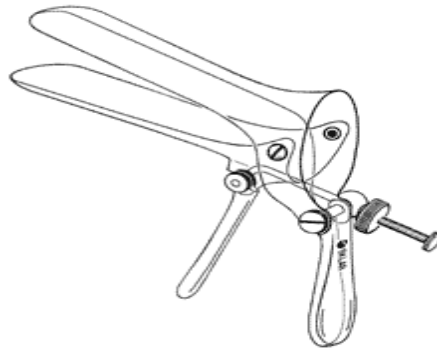
At this point, it should be very clear that *anyone* who is, or has been sexually active is at risk for an STI and therefore, needs to be tested. STI testing is simply a healthy practice!

## **How Does a Person get Tested?**

A person can get tested by setting up an appointment with a doctor. If a person does not have a family doctor or is not comfortable seeing their family doctor for this reason, please keep in mind that we offer STI testing and treatment at Planned Parenthood. We offer non-judgmental and confidential medical clinics throughout the week. You can simply call our Centre for an appointment and if you are a NL resident, STI testing is covered under MCP.

Testing for persons with a cervix is most convenient during a pap test. Normally, Pap testing should start at the age of 20 (if sexually active) and continue annually until you have 3 negative results in a row. If this occurs, your doctor may decide to spread out to once every 3 years. A pap test is responsible for detecting abnormal cells on a cervix. This test is a preventative measure against cervical cancer. **Keep in mind that a pap test alone does not normally test for STIs!**

During a pap test, a doctor will insert a speculum into the vagina to clearly see the cervix (opening to the uterus) and the doctor will swab the cervix. If you are visiting a doctor to have a pap test and you want to have additional STI testing at that time, please tell your doctor before they begin the pap test. To test for bacterial infections such as Chlamydia and Gonorrhea, the doctor will be required to take extra swabs from the cervix. A urine test for Chlamydia and Gonorrhea may be available in your area; however, swabs are more effective in detecting infections in individuals with a cervix.



Typical speculum used during STI and Pap testing

Individuals with a penis are not required to visit a doctor as frequently; therefore, they have to make a trip to see the doctor specifically for STI screening. To test for bacterial infections such as Chlamydia and Gonorrhea, the doctor will be required to take swabs from the urethra (inside the tip of the penis). This may sound painful, but the penis is made from soft tissue that easily stretches. Most individuals are more uncomfortable with the thought of a doctor seeing their penis than the swab itself. A urine test for Chlamydia and Gonorrhea may be available in your area.

A doctor will provide patients with a slip to have blood drawn to test for the following infections: HIV, Hepatitis B&C and Syphilis. At some clinics, they draw the blood on site, but the majority of times a patient will be required to go to a hospital to have blood drawn. This testing is confidential. If you are interested in anonymous testing (no identifying information), please contact your local Health and Community Services office.

As mentioned above, to get tested for skin-to-skin contact infections such as genital herpes and genital warts, a person needs to be experiencing an outbreak (sores or growths) in the boxer short area to be diagnosed. **Testing for these infections is NOT part of regular STI screening!**

### **How Does a Person get their Test Results?**

If you have swabs taken or provide a urine sample during your visit, the results will return to that clinic location within 2 to 4 weeks.

If you have blood drawn, the results will return to the clinic where you receive your slip within 2 to 4 weeks. If you are tested for HIV, your doctor may request for you to have a repeat test in 3 to 6 months to allow enough time for the antibodies to appear in your blood if you have been infected.

If you visit a doctor due to the presence of bumps or sores on your genitals, the doctor may be able to diagnose you at the time of your visit if it is indeed an STI such as genital herpes or genital warts.

Keep in mind that a 2 to 4 week waiting time for test results is very normal, and can sometimes take longer. The labs that analyze these tests have a high number of tests to process and they can slow down when they have staff on vacation.

### **Safer Sex**

If you are going to engage in sexual activity (vaginal, oral or anal sex), it is extremely important that you know how to keep yourself safer from contracting an STI. If you do not use protection with ALL types of sex every single time you are active, you are at a VERY HIGH risk of contracting an STI. The following are some safer sex practices that need to be used correctly and consistently to help lower your risk of contracting an STI.

**Vaginal Sex (including sex toys):** Latex external condom, non-latex external condom **OR** internal condom.

**Oral Sex on a Penis:** Non-lubricated external condom **OR** flavoured external condom.

**Oral Sex on a Vagina or Anus:** Dental dam. **You can make your own dental dam from an unrolled external condom (non-lubricated or flavoured). Simply snip off the tip of the condom and then snip up one side and unroll.**

**Anal Sex (including sex toys):** Latex external condom **OR** non-latex external condom.

***NEVER use two condoms at once! The friction between the condoms can cause holes/damage to the condom(s).***

If you would like further information on specific types of STIs and/or safer sex practices, please feel free to drop by our Centre or contact us by phone or email. If you would like to make an appointment to see one of our doctors or nurse practitioners for any medical concern related to sexual health, please call us to set up an appointment.

## **Sexual Health Questions? We Have Answers!**

### **Location:**

47 St. Clare Avenue, St. John's, NL, A1C 2J9

### **Hours:**

Monday: 9am – 4:30pm

Tuesday: 9am – 4:30pm

Wednesday: 9am – 4:30pm

Thursday: 12pm – 6:00pm

Friday: 9am – 4:30pm

**Phone:**

579-1009

Toll Free: 1-877-NO MYTHS

(1-877-666-9847)

**Website:**

[www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com](http://www.plannedparenthoodnlshc.com)

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[pp.nlshc@gmail.com](mailto:pp.nlshc@gmail.com)

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