

## Sexually transmitted infections

You are part of it!  
Healthier, fitter, safer.



# Sexually transmitted infections

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are very common!

Nearly a million people get an STI every day.

The presence of an untreated STI can increase the risk of becoming infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus, causing AIDS).

The risk of STIs is increased for seafarers because of:

- Working and living away from spouses and partners.
- Single-sex working and living arrangements dominated by men.
- Lack of information about risk and preventive measures.
- Enhanced probability of sex with casual partners due to travelling!

Unprotected vaginal and anal intercourse carries the highest risks for the most dangerous sexually transmitted infections.

The less sexual partners a person has, the lower the risk of infection.

There is no risk of acquiring any sexually transmitted infection from casual day-to-day contact on board.

Hepatitis B, HIV and syphilis are also transmitted through transfusion of contaminated blood or blood products and the use of contaminated needles and medical equipment.

# Symptoms and treatment of STIs

## SYMPTOMS

### Chlamydia

Men with Chlamydia commonly experience a urethral discharge from the penis, and may have inflammation of the tube leading from the bladder to the tip of the penis. This discomfort may then disappear but the infection can still be passed on to a sexual partner. In women, genital chlamydial infection often does not cause any symptoms. However, there may be non-specific symptoms such as cystitis, a change in the vaginal discharge, or mild lower abdominal pain.

### Genital warts

Many people who get the virus (HPV) that leads to genital warts do not show any recognisable symptoms, and this is why the infection can go undiagnosed for a long time. However, if symptoms are present, they may include small white spots or lumps on the penis and around the vulva or anus but also hidden inside the vagina or anus.

## TREATMENT

**Chlamydia** is treated with antibiotics, either using a single dose, or a course for a couple of weeks.

**Genital warts** is treated by either painting them with a liquid, or freezing them with a spray. However, some people need a number of treatments, and if the warts return, further treatment will be required.

## SYMPTOMS

### Genital herpes

Like genital warts, genital herpes is a condition that often presents no symptoms and can remain undiagnosed for long periods of time. Symptoms may show in the form of flu-like symptoms, itchiness, burning or tingling around the genitals, small, fluid-filled blisters that burst to leave sores, and pain when passing urine.

### Gonorrhoea

Gonorrhoea is an infection that is found in both sexes and can affect the genitals, anus, rectum and throat. About half of all women infected with gonorrhoea, and over 90% of men experience symptoms, including a thin, watery discharge from the vagina or tip of the penis that can appear yellow or green, and pain when urinating.

### Syphilis

The symptoms of syphilis usually begin with a small sore on the penis or vagina. Up to six months after the initial symptoms occur, flu-like symptoms, such as aches and shivering may appear.

## TREATMENT

The virus for **genital herpes** remains in the body as there is no treatment that gets rid of it completely. Antiviral drugs may be used to relieve the symptoms.

Early treatment for **gonorrhoea** involves a single dose of antibiotics. If complications occur further treatment will be needed.

**Syphilis** can be treated during the early stages using a course of antibiotics. It can also be treated during the later stages of infection, but any damage to the heart or nervous system may be irreversible.

## SYMPTOMS

### Hepatitis B

This viral STI is spread in a similar way to HIV, but is generally more infectious. Symptoms of hepatitis include feeling generally tired and unwell with fevers, aching joints, rashes and jaundice. Some people can be infected without having any symptoms and make a full recovery. Others can be very ill but still recover completely. However, long term infection is also possible. This can lead to progressive liver damage.

### HIV

Many people do not develop any symptoms when they first become infected with HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). Some people, however, get a flu-like illness within three to six weeks after exposure to the virus. The only way to know if you are HIV-positive is to have a test. Over time, infection with HIV weakens the immune system leading to difficulty fighting off certain infections, leading to AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome).

## TREATMENT

People who are at higher risk of catching **hepatitis B**, such as men who have sex with men, or people who come into contact with human blood at work, can be immunised against the infection. Treatment of active and chronic hepatitis B exists, but is expensive and debilitating. It is restricted to specialised centres.

While there is no cure for **AIDS**, drugs can be used to suppress the HIV virus and preserve the immune system for as long as possible. Antiretroviral drugs cannot completely eradicate the HIV infection; treatment is expensive and complex and most countries have only a few centres that are able to provide it.

## SYMPTOMS

### Non-specific urethritis

Non-specific urethritis is an STI that affects men. It causes discomfort of the urethra (the tube that leads from the bladder to the tip of the penis, along which urine is passed), and a urethral discharge is also common.

### Trichomoniasis

Trichomoniasis is an infection of the genitals that is caused by the bacterium trichomonas vaginalis (TV). The condition often has no symptoms, but symptoms may include a yellow or green discharge from the vagina with soreness. Men usually act as carriers and do not show symptoms.

### Pubic lice

Symptoms of pubic lice include itchy skin, black powder (lice droppings) in underwear and white eggs.

## TREATMENT

**Non-specific urethritis (NSU)** is treated with antibiotics, although damage to the urethra can take time to heal.

**Trichomonas vaginalis (TV)** is easily treated with a course of antibiotic tablets.

**Pubic lice** are easily treated. Special shampoos, creams or lotions are used to kill the lice and their eggs.

## SYMPTOMS

### Scabies

Scabies can occur anywhere on the body, but sometimes the signs are hard to see. Symptoms can appear weeks after first contact and include itching (especially at night), a rash, and tiny spots.

## TREATMENT

**Scabies** is easily treated. A special lotion is applied all over the body and is washed off 24 hours later.

### Thrush

Symptoms of thrush include intense itching around the penis or vagina, with a thick, white discharge, and the appearance of tiny white spots around the genitals.

**Thrush** is easily treated using pessaries (tablets that are inserted into the vagina), cream or tablets. Creams are usually used to treat men who have thrush.

### **The absence of symptoms does not guarantee absence of infection.**

In any case, consult a doctor if you have taken a risk, even if there are no symptoms.

As STIs are easily passed on through sexual contact, it is important that current and past sexual partners are notified and treated, in order to reduce the risk of spreading and re-infection.

# STIs, HIV/AIDS on board

Sexual or blood borne transmission are not likely routes for the transmission of infection in the normal course of work at sea.

Occupational exposure risks are slight and limited to the treatment of injuries and to procedures undertaken by the small number of healthcare staff working on large vessels.

Medical injections using unsterile equipment are a possible source of infection but also tattooing, acupuncture, ear (or other) piercing, razor blades, etc.

HIV/AIDS is a maritime issue. Not only because it affects the workforce, but also because ships have a role to play in the wider struggle to limit the spread and effects of the epidemic.

HIV cannot be transmitted by normal social contact, via insects, via normal skin contact or via toilets.

The HIV virus is transmitted in blood and body fluids and so infection arises from sexual contact, needle sharing in drug users and from contamination during medical procedures.

Pre-employment HIV testing is illegal in many jurisdictions. It can only be justified if it can be shown to predict likely risks while working at sea prior to the next medical assessment.

HIV testing should be a matter for the individual and their clinical advisers and not a condition for obtaining employment. It may lead to discrimination against the person either by denial of employment or harassment by other workers.



# Precautions against STIs

- **Safer sex reduces risks:**
  - Safer sex also means protecting your partner.
  - The ideal for many people is to have sex with only one partner.
  - A lot of unplanned and unsafe sexual contacts occur under the influence of alcohol!
  - When it comes to safer sex, rely on yourself.
  - Condoms are the best protection.
- **A high standard of infection control practice has to be used in the care of all diseases and injuries on board**
  - Careful handling and disposal of sharp objects (needles or other sharp objects).
  - Hand-washing before and after a procedure.
  - Use of gloves, gowns and masks for direct contact with blood and other body fluids.
  - Safe disposal of waste contaminated with body fluids and blood.
  - Proper disinfection of instruments and other contaminated equipment.
  - Proper handling of soiled linen and clothing.
- **Vaccination against hepatitis B is strongly recommended!**
- **Blood transfusions should be avoided in most developing countries as donors are seldom tested for HIV antibodies.**

# Where to find advice?

If you would like to have more information on STIs, HIV/AIDS and are not able to consult your doctor or a medical clinic, you can contact SeafarerHelp, a free and confidential service provided by the International Seafarers' Welfare and Assistance Network (ISWAN).

SeafarerHelp is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, in more than ten languages including Arabic, Chinese, English, Filipino, Hindi and Russian. You can reach SeafarerHelp by telephone, email, SMS, Skype and Live Chat.

As well as being there for information about health, SeafarerHelp exists to help you with any issues or problems you may want to discuss, about anything from working conditions to family problems. Our trained helpline staff will help you by putting you in touch with the agency which is most likely to be able to help you.



# Call SeafarerHelp free (landlines only) from the following countries:\*

Australia	00 11 800 7323 2737
Austria	00 800 7323 2737
Bahrain	8000 4090
Belgium	00 800 7323 2737
Brazil	0800 891 9181
Canada	011 800 7323 2737
China	10 800 441 0168
Cyprus	00 800 7323 2737
Denmark	00 800 7323 2737
Finland	00 800 7323 2737
France	00 800 7323 2737
Germany	00 800 7323 2737
Hong Kong	00 1 800 7323 2737
Hungary	00 800 7323 2737
Iceland	00 800 7323 2737
India	1 800 425 4357
Ireland	00 800 7323 2737
Israel	012/013/014 800 7323 2737
Italy	00 800 7323 2737
Japan	001/0041/0061 010 800 7323 2737
Korea	001/002/008 800 7323 2737
Luxembourg	00 800 7323 2737
Macau	00 800 7323 2737
Malaysia	00 800 7323 2737
Mexico	01 800 33 7323 2737
Netherlands	00 800 7323 2737
New Zealand	00 800 7323 2737
Norway	00 800 7323 2737
Philippines	00 800 737283 00
Portugal	00 800 7323 2737
Russia	810 800 2136 2044
Singapore	00 1 800 7323 2737
South Africa	09 800 7323 2737
Spain	00 800 7323 2737
Sweden	00 800 7323 2737
Switzerland	00 800 7323 2737
Taiwan	00 800 7323 2737
Thailand	001 800 442 096
UK	0800 7323 2737
United Arab Emirates	800 044 0104
USA	011 800 7323 2737

\* Free phone may not be available in some areas

## Worldwide support for seafarers from SeafarerHelp

- 24/7 assistance, 365 days per year.
- We speak a wide range of languages.
- Whatever the problem ask SeafarerHelp

### Contact SeafarerHelp

SMS: +44 (0)762 481 8405

Skype: info-seafarerhelp.org

Live chat: [www.seafarerhelp.org](http://www.seafarerhelp.org)

### For countries where there is no free phone:

Call collect on +44 (0) 207 323 2737

Alternatively ask us to call you straight back.

### Email SeafarerHelp:

[help@seafarerhelp.org](mailto:help@seafarerhelp.org)



**SeafarerHelp**

*The lifeline for seafarers*

If you would like more information and materials, go to:

[www.seafarershealth.org](http://www.seafarershealth.org)

where you can download guidelines, posters and leaflets on more health topics for seafarers: Food safety, Fit on board, Safe travel, Healthy food, Malaria, Overweight and HIV/AIDS.

### Find us on:



International Seafarers' Welfare  
and Assistance Network

E [iswan@iswan.org.uk](mailto:iswan@iswan.org.uk)

W [www.seafarershealth.org](http://www.seafarershealth.org)

