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Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Infections

There is nothing more nerve-wracking than noticing something different....down there. We've all done a quick panicked Google where we've looked at photos and compared our symptoms. It's more common than you think!

The world of sexually transmitted diseases and infections can be overwhelming. Do you know the difference between super gonorrhoea, thrush and herpes? No? Then read on as our helpful guide will tell you everything you need to know about STD/Is.

What are some of the common symptoms of an STD or STI?

There are a lot of different STD/Is out there with multiple symptoms. Here are the most common symptoms to watch out for:

- an unusual discharge from the vagina, penis, or anus
- lumps or skin growths around the genitals or bottom (anus)
- rashes
- pain when peeing
- vaginal bleeding
- itchy genitals or anus
- blisters and sores around the genitals or anus
- warts around the genitals or anus

It's worth noting that some of these symptoms may be a sign that you have other conditions. It's important that if you suspect you have an STD/Is then you need to get tested.

How soon do STI/Ds appear?

It depends on which STD/I you may have been exposed to as each has different development times. Some can take days, weeks or in some cases years to show. There are also some, such as chlamydia that have no symptoms at all.

When do I need to get tested?

If you or your partner show signs of an STD, then you need to be tested. It may be nothing - but it could be something. Many STDs are treatable with antibiotics. You also need to get tested regularly or if you have a new partner or sex without a condom. The same goes for sharing sex toys with someone new if you haven't sterilised them!

What are the different types of STD/Is?

Chlamydia

What is it?

Chlamydia is a bacterial infection which is one of the most common STIs in the UK. Most doctors recommend that you get checked once a year for chlamydia.

How do I get it?

It is usually passed on through unprotected sex or exchanging infected genital fluids by sharing sex toys or genital contact. A pregnant woman can also pass on chlamydia to their baby.

What are the symptoms?

Pain when peeing, unusual discharge from vagina/anus/penis, for people with a vagina, it can mean pain in the stomach and bleeding between periods. For people with a penis, it can mean pain and swelling in the testicles.

How is it treated?

Usually treated by antibiotics. It is tested with a swab or urine test.

How serious is it?

Chlamydia can cause infertility, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and ectopic pregnancy for people with a womb.

In rare cases for people with a penis, it can cause the tubes that carry sperm from the testicles to become inflamed.

Gonorrhoea

What is it?

Gonorrhoea is a bacterial infection.

How do I get it?

Unprotected sex where the bacteria is present in genital fluids. Sharing sex toys that have not been sanitised properly. It can also be passed from a mother to her baby occasionally causing blindness or conjunctivitis in newborns.

What are the symptoms?

Typical symptoms include a thick green or yellow discharge from the penis or vagina, pain when peeing and sometimes bleeding in between periods for people who menstruate. Some do not experience any symptoms at all.

How is it treated?

It is usually tested through a swab of discharge. People with a penis can have their urine tested. It is treated through antibiotics or antibiotic injections.

How serious is it?

It can cause serious long-term problems if left untreated. People with a vagina may develop pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) or infertility as a result. It can also cause miscarriage or premature birth. For those with testicles, it can cause a painful infection in the testicles and prostate gland, which may lead to reduced fertility.

Hepatitis B

What is it?

It is a liver infection spread through blood, vaginal and semen.

How do I get it?

Vaginal or anal sex without a condom, injecting drugs or being punctured with a shared needle, a blood transfusion where the donated blood has not been screened for Hep B, tattoos or piercings without properly sterilised equipment.

What are the symptoms?

Feeling or being sick, a high temperature, tiredness, pain in the upper stomach or yellowing of the skin and eyes.

How is it treated?

A doctor can give you medicine to help with the symptoms although it may clear up on its own. If it lasts over six months, then a doctor may prescribe antivirals or medication. You will need regular liver check-ups to make sure it hasn't been affected.

How serious is it?

Left untreated, it can cause liver damage and increase the risk of liver cancer.

Herpes

What is it?

A sexually transmitted infection.

How do I get it?

Skin-to-skin contact with an infected area, if a cold sore touches your genitals during oral sex or by sharing sex toys with someone who has herpes.

What are the symptoms?

Small blisters that can burst leaving open sores on your genitals, bottom, thighs or anus. A tingling, burning sensation around your genitals and/or anus. Pain when peeing and/or discharge.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for genital herpes and the virus will stay in the body. However, the sores usually clear up on their own. They can reoccur causing another outbreak. However, they can reoccur causing another outbreak. Antiviral medicines are usually prescribed.

Prevention

Use a condom every time you have sex, avoid vaginal/anal or oral sex during an outbreak and properly sanitise sex toys.

How serious is it?

Over time, outbreaks can become less severe, and some people may never have an outbreak.

HIV /AIDS

What is it?

HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks your immune system and makes it hard for you to fight off infections. The virus attaches to immune system cells called CD4 lymphocyte cells which normally protect the body against bacteria and germs. Once it has attached, it enters the CD4 cells to make thousands of copies of itself. These copies kill the cells in the process.

Eventually, over time, the number of CD4 cells drops (referred to as CD4 count) and this prevents your immune system from working. During this time, you may feel well and not know that this is happening.

AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) is the name used to describe several potentially life-threatening infectious illnesses that occur after your immune system is damaged by HIV.

How do I get it?

HIV can be found in the body fluids of a person living with HIV/AIDS such as semen, vaginal and anal fluids, blood, and breast milk. It cannot be transferred in sweat, urine, or saliva. The most common ways to get HIV are through sex without a condom, sharing needles or through breastfeeding from mother to baby.

What are the symptoms?

People may experience a short flu-like illness around 2 weeks after initial infection. This may last for a week or two including sore throat, fever, tiredness, joint pain, muscle pain, body rash and swollen glands. Once the immune system has been damaged you may experience weight loss, chronic diarrhoea, night sweats, recurring infections, skin problems and serious life-threatening illnesses.

How is it treated?

Early diagnosis means you can control the virus and reduce the chances of becoming seriously unwell. You can be tested at any number of clinics or charities. A quick Google search should tell you what is near your neighbourhood. A test will usually involve a blood or saliva sample. You can also send off for a home testing kit. Both positive and negative HIV tests may need to be repeated 1 to 3 months after potential exposure to HIV infection. If you test positive, then you will need another test to confirm the result.

Antiretrovirals are used to treat HIV and stop the virus from replicating in the body to create further damage. These usually come in tablet form. However, HIV can develop a resistance to just one medication so most people are given a combination of different medicines to lower this risk. HIV treatments aim to have an undetectable viral load which means that your level cannot be detected by a test. Prevention: Use a condom every time you have sex, avoid vaginal/anal or oral sex during an outbreak and by using clean needles. Regular testing is also advised.

PEP

Emergency anti-HIV medicine (post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) may stop you from becoming infected, but it must be started within 72 hours of possible exposure. It's recommended that you start it as soon as possible preferably within 24 hours.

PrEP

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is used to reduce the risk of getting HIV. It works by stopping HIV from getting into your system to replicate itself. You will only be protected if there are high enough levels of PrEP in your system. PrEP can be used by anyone who is at risk of HIV and comes in two tablets which are also often used to treat HIV.

Lice

What is it?

Tiny insects that can live on body hair, especially around the penis or vagina. They can also be found on the chest, armpits, face, and eyelashes. They do not live in the hair on someone's head.

How do I get it?

Close body contact with someone who has pubic lice.

What are the symptoms?

Itching which gets worse at night, small red or blue dots on the skin, white or yellow dots (lice eggs) attached to the hair or dark red or brown spots in your underwear.

How is it treated?

You or a doctor or nurse can comb through or check public hair. They will suggest creams or shampoos that can be applied to the hair to kill the lice. You need to leave this on the body before washing it off and reapply it again two weeks later.

How is prevented?

Do not have contact with someone you know is being treated for lice, get treatment as quickly as possible if you do have lice and do not share clothing. Putting bedsheets on a hot wash can help to kill lice and vacuum a mattress to kill lice.

Lymphogranuloma venereum (LGV)

What is it?

A sexually transmitted infection caused by a rare form of chlamydia bacteria.

How do I get it?

Unprotected sex with someone who has LGV.

What are the symptoms?

LGV may have no symptoms, but some may notice a small ulcer or lump on their genitals. People with a penis may notice rectal pain and/or bleeding, mucous and blood-stained discharge as well as constipation.

How is it treated?

A swab will be taken from the rectum, vagina, throat, or any ulcers you may have. A urine sample can also be tested. A course of antibiotics is usually given similar to the ones prescribed for chlamydia.

How is it prevented?

Using condoms using sexual contact.

How serious is it?

It can cause swelling of the lymph nodes in the groin going on to cause serious rectal problems. Although rare, the infection can spread through the bloodstream causing inflammation of the joints or liver.

Mycoplasma Genitalium (MGEN)

What is it?

A bacteria spread through vaginal or anal sex.

How do I get it?

Unprotected sex with someone who is infected or sharing unclean sex toys.

What are the symptoms?

Almost all MGN infections are symptom-free although occasionally someone will experience symptoms. Symptoms can appear differently for those with a vagina or a penis. People with a penis can experience pain when peeing, white discharge, burning or itching in the urethra, painful testicles, pain or discharge from the anus. People with a vagina can experience pain when peeing, pain during sex, bleeding after sex, pain in the stomach or pelvis, unusual discharge from the vagina and discomfort or discharge from the anus.

How is it treated?

A swab is taken from the rectum or vagina. A urine sample can also be taken from those with a penis. A course of antibiotics over ten days.

How is it prevented?

Using condoms and sterile sex toys.

How serious is it?

MG is a cause of pelvic inflammatory disease (PID). This could affect your fertility.

Monkeypox (Mpox)

What is it?

A rare infection.

How do I get it?

Close skin contact with the blisters or scabs of someone with Mpox, sharing clothing or bedding and towels or a cough or sneeze of an infected person. In certain parts of the world, it can be caught through infected rodents (such as rats, mice and squirrels).

What are the symptoms?

Backache, fever, headaches, muscle aches, swollen glands, chills, exhaustion and joint pain. Some may experience anal bleeding and/or a rash that appears like chicken pox.

How is it treated?

It is usually mild with people taking a few weeks to recover.

How is it prevented?

Avoid close contact with someone who shows symptoms of Mpox and take a sex break from that person too! Avoid sharing bedding or towels with someone if they have Mpox.

How serious is it?

Some people may need hospital treatment.

Vaccine

There is a Mpox vaccine which is available on the NHS. This is usually offered to healthcare workers who are treating Mpox patients, people who have been in close contact with someone who has had Mpox and men who have sex with men or have multiple partners.

Scabies

What is it?

An itchy rash.

How do I get it?

It is caused by mites spread by close body contact - such as sex.

What are the symptoms?

Intense itching and raised rashes or spots. It often affects the skin between the fingers, around the wrists, under the arms, and around the waist, groin and bottom.

How is it treated?

Usually by a cream or lotion that is spread across the whole body. The treatment needs to be repeated one week later.

How is it prevented?

Scabies is incredibly infectious. Everyone in your household will need to be treated even if they don't have the symptoms. You will need to wash all bedding on a hot wash and dry. If there are fabrics that cannot be washed, then they need to be placed in a sealed bag for three days until the mites die. Avoid sex until someone has completed the treatment.

How serious is it?

While it isn't serious, the itching can cause skin infections such as impetigo.

Syphilis

What is it?

A sexually transmitted infection that can cause potentially life-threatening problems.

How do I get it?

Unprotected sex with someone who is infected. Coming into contact with an ulcer or sore. Injecting drugs with a needle that has been used with an infected person. A mother can pass syphilis to their child too.

What are the symptoms?

It can take three weeks for symptoms to show up. Symptoms can include small sores on the genitals and anus, sores in other areas such as the mouth, lips or hands. White wart-like growths on the genitals or anus. A rash on the palms of the hands or feet. White patches in the mouth as well as flu-like symptoms. These can include fever, headaches, swollen glands and/or tiredness. Some people may experience hair loss.

How is it treated?

A doctor or nurse will check your penis, vagina and bottom (anus) for syphilis sores (ulcers) and swab them. They will check the body for other signs of a rash or sore. You can also opt for a home test. Sometimes the symptoms can improve or go away completely, but if you have not been treated the infection is still in your body. Antibiotics are usually prescribed in tablet, capsule, or injection form.

How is it prevented?

Wear a condom during sexual contact, don't share sex toys, use clean needles, and don't share them. Also, make sure you complete your syphilis treatment.

How serious is it?

Untreated syphilis can include heart problems like angina, seizures, memory problems, nerve pain and joint damage. A person may develop problems with the skin, teeth, liver, or bones.

Trichomoniasis

What is it?

A sexually transmitted disease usually caused by parasites called *Trichomonas vaginalis* (TV)

How do I get it?

Trichomoniasis mainly affects the vagina and urethra. It is spread by having sex without a condom or by sharing sex toys. It is not thought to be spread by oral sex.

What are the symptoms?

For those with a vagina: thick, thin, or frothy discharge which may be green or yellow and have a smell. There may be itching, soreness or swelling around the vagina and thighs. Pain or discomfort while having sex.

For those with a penis: pain when peeing or ejaculating, needing to pee more frequently, thin, white discharge from the penis and soreness, swelling or redness around the head of the penis or foreskin.

How is it treated?

Usually treated with antibiotics after a genital examination, swab or urine test.

How serious is it?

Complications are rare but pregnant people may find their babies are born prematurely or underweight.

Genital Warts

What is it?

Genital warts are small, rough lumps that can appear around the vagina, penis, or anus.

How do I get it?

Unprotected sex or shared sex toys. You can spread genital warts by touching an infected area and then touching your own body.

What are the symptoms?

Lumps that appear on their own or in a cluster and feel soft or firm. They are usually white, red, skin coloured. You may also have pain or discomfort during sex along with problems peeing. This may mean you have blood, find it hard to pee or stop and start. Lots of people do not have symptoms but can still have the virus.

How is it treated?

Warts are usually diagnosed by examination by a doctor. They may not need treatment and may clear up after six months. However, treatment may mean creams, liquids, freezing or surgery.

HPV Vaccine

The HPV Vaccine has been offered to children aged 12 to 13 in England which protects against warts and cervical or anal cancers. The vaccine has also been offered to some men who have sex with men, people living with HIV, sex workers and transgender men/women. In 2023, Scotland announced the country detected no cases of cervical cancer in women born between 1988 and 1996 who were given the HPV vaccine between ages 12 to 13.

STD Diagnosis

To get a diagnosis, you will need to go to a sexual health clinic. A GP will refer you to one if they believe you may have an STD/I. The sexual health clinics will be able to test and get results to you quicker than a GP. You may not need to make an appointment as many clinics operate drop-in centres.

You do not have to give your name or any identifying details if you don't want to. You can also request a female or male doctor if you feel more comfortable. A clinic can also test your partners without revealing your identity.

Doctors will usually ask about your sex life, examine your genitals or anus then explain what tests they need to run. Testing can include urine or blood samples, swabs from the urethra, genital examination, or a swab from the vagina. Tests for herpes are usually conducted when you have sores where a swab will be taken from one.

Some tests will be available on the day while others will take a week or two to come back. If it's positive, you will be asked to call the clinic to discuss treatment.

How often do you need to go?

You will need to go if you notice new symptoms or if you have any concerns that you may have been exposed to an STD/I.

It is a good idea to make home testing or a visit to a clinic, a regular part of your health checkups.

Home testing

Home testing for certain STDS is available and is often easier for many people. This can be for several different reasons from embarrassment to religion to disability and more. It's personal preference.

You can request a kit which will be posted out to you in a plain envelope. Follow the instructions on the pack before mailing it back.

Disclosure and what to do next

It's never nice having to tell someone that you may have given them an STD/I but it is essential that you do. Your partners will need to be tested so that they can get treatment. Not disclosing means you are putting their health at risk.

Not only that but if you sleep with them again after treatment, if they haven't been treated then you risk passing it back and forth between you.

Luckily, sexual health clinics can help you disclose by calling for you. They won't disclose who tested positive, just that someone the person has had sexual contact with has. They will then ask them to come in and be tested too.

What STDS are not curable?

There are 4 are incurable viral infections: hepatitis B, herpes simplex virus (HSV), HIV and human papillomavirus (HPV)

What are super-STDS?

Super (-resistant) gonorrhoea is a strain of the sexually transmitted disease which resists typical treatment from antibiotics. Considered a superbug, it is much harder to treat and is thought to be a result of overreliance on antibiotics. Super gonorrhoea has the same symptoms as regular gonorrhoea including:

- creamy, or greenish vaginal discharge.
- heavier periods or spotting between periods.
- pain during vaginal sex.
- sharp pain in your lower abdomen.
- pain or burning while urinating.
- urinating more frequently.
- anal itching and soreness.
- anal bleeding or discharge.

If left untreated, super-resistant gonorrhoea can lead to complications such as pelvic inflammation, infertility, and ectopic pregnancies in people with a womb, scrotal pain and swelling in people with a penis.

Thrush

Thrush is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI), but it can be made worse by sex. It is caused by a usually harmless fungus called candida that tends to develop in warm, moist conditions and develops if there is a change in bacterial balance.

Thrush can affect any gender. You'll usually need antifungal medicine to get rid of it. This can be a tablet you take orally, a tablet you insert into the vagina or a cream to relieve the irritation.

Cystitis

Cystitis means soreness and swelling of the bladder. It is usually caused by a bladder infection and is not a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Symptoms usually include a frequent urge to urinate, a feeling of a full bladder, and cloudy or strange-smelling urine. Other symptoms may include pain during intercourse.

Cystitis can be treated with over-the-counter medicine or sachets. Additionally, people can get relief from increasing fluids and drinking cranberry juice. You may need to see your GP if symptoms don't start to improve after a few weeks.

Cysts

The Bartholin's glands are located on each side of the vaginal opening. These glands are responsible for secreting a fluid that helps to lubricate the vagina. Sometimes the openings of these glands can become obstructed which causes fluid to back up into the gland. The result is relatively painless swelling that can feel scary called a Bartholin's cyst.

The cysts may go away on their own but it's important not to squeeze or prick them. This may lead to infection which will require antibiotics. Painkillers and warm water compresses can help in the meantime to help reduce swelling or discomfort.

Harmless cysts can appear on the penis but it's important if you are in any doubt to visit your GP for diagnosis or treatment.

How to tell an STD from a Cyst:

Deep breathe and don't panic! There are a few ways you can tell you if it or if it isn't but ultimately, the only person who can say for sure is a doctor or nurse.

You should check:

How they change

Cysts will stay a similar size but may increase over time. STDs will come and go. They may also feel painful and be accompanied by other symptoms.

How they feel

Cysts can be hard and are normally not painful. STDs will be softer and may cause a lot of pain if you touch them or worse yet, they may burst causing further pain.

How many bumps there are

Cysts are usually larger and appear on their own. STD bumps (think herpes for example) appear in clusters of small ones.

STDS and pregnancy

If you are pregnant then you should still be screened for STD/Is. During your pregnancy, you'll be offered a blood test for three infectious diseases including hepatitis B, HIV, and syphilis. This forms part of routine antenatal screening for everyone.

Blood testing needs to be done as early as possible in pregnancy so that treatment can be started early. If you need it, it will help reduce the risk of passing the infection on to your newborn.

Some STIs may affect fertility for any gender making it difficult for people to get pregnant. As well as creating further health problems for parents and the new baby during or after pregnancy. Some treatments will not be suitable for pregnant people.

If you already know you have an STD/I then you will need to disclose to your doctor so that they can start advising you on what to do next and preparing for your pregnancy. Your baby may need to be monitored after birth in the case of some STD/Is or given antibiotics.

Being pregnant doesn't prevent you from getting a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

How to prevent STD/Is

The best way to protect yourself is to use a condom. Shop responsibly when buying condoms using a reputable source and make sure that the right fit or thickness is right for you. Don't forget to add lubricant if you need to and make sure your product has a CE or BSI kite mark which means they have been tested to a high standard.

You won't be able to catch STD/Is from sharing things like mugs, glasses or toilet seats. However, sharing needles or other materials that can puncture the skin that isn't sterilized can pass certain STDs such as HIV or syphilis. Sharing sex toys with someone can also be risky so make sure to keep toys clean.

Regular testing means early detection meaning faster treatment.

Embarrassment

There is still a lot of stigma around STD/Is which can make people feel embarrassed. Just remember that your doctor, nurse, or sexual health clinic deals with these queries all the time. There is no need to feel uncomfortable, but you can either opt for home testing or ask to speak to your doctor to see if they can make adjustments for you if you really can't face it.

If you've had a particular STI once, then you can still catch it again!

STD/I and sex toys

There are several ways to wash and sterilise your toys, but it depends on the material and if it is waterproof or resistant. Knowing the difference between the two can mean you keep your vibrator in working condition for longer.

Toys should state if they are waterproof or water-resistant on the box or instructions. Water resistance will allow a smaller amount of water like a splash rather than a bath.

Basic cleaning will only remove surface material.

Disinfecting/ sanitising removes bacteria to make the toy hygienic. Disinfecting a toy regularly is a good idea but if you are using it with a new partner then it's necessary to pre- and post-contact disinfect it. This is especially relevant if someone using the toy has had an infection or thrush. Sterilizing kills absolutely all bacteria and viruses. Disinfecting and sanitising can mean a toy is free from any nasty bacteria that may linger after a quick wash.

Boiling

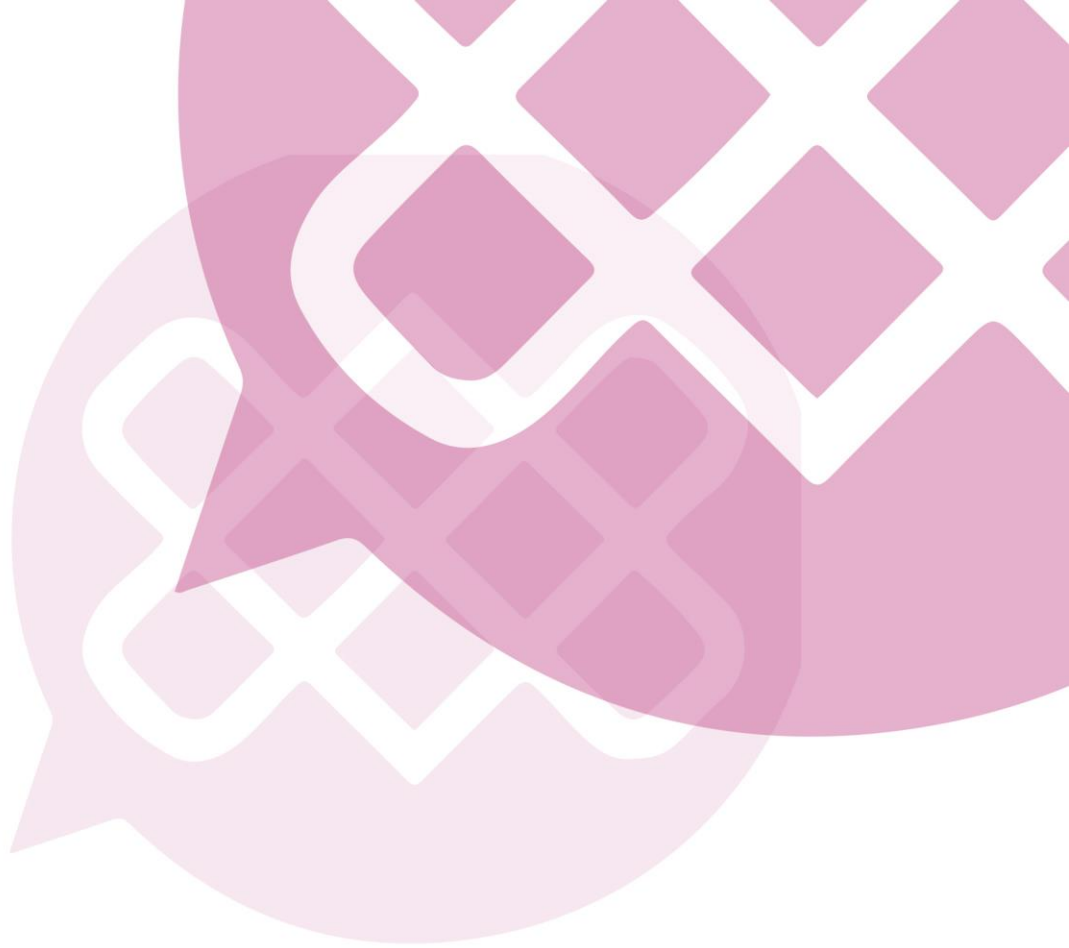
A toy can be disinfected by boiling if it is 100% silicone, borosilicate glass or stainless steel. You will need to surface clean them first before popping them into a pot of boiling water for a few minutes. Be extra careful with glass so put a towel down in the pot to avoid it jumping in the water.

Dishwashers

Incredibly, this can work to keep some toys clean, but you may not want to do this in a shared house! You can deep clean non-mechanized 100% silicone, stainless steel, or borosilicate glass toys in the dishwasher. Just be careful not to use any soap or dishwasher tablets as they are far too harsh on the material. The heat in a dishwasher will cause a problem for vibrator motors though so be careful not to wreck your new toy. The toy will also need to be waterproof too. You should note that this isn't as effective as boiling your toys at killing bacteria so you may want to think about other ways to sanitise.

Toy cleaners and wipes

Many shops will also sell toy cleaners which are similar to soap and water but with an added sanitiser. Each cleanser will have instructions on how to use so follow the instructions. However, they can be expensive, and many wipes are not environmentally friendly. Wipes are also surface cleaners not a deep clean so be prepared to have to do a deep clean before you next use the toy as they can leave behind fluids and bacteria.



About us

Undressing Disability' is a global campaign which aims to raise standards in sexual health and sexual awareness for disabled people. Issues around sexuality and sexual frustration are frequently raised by disabled people who feel that they have less opportunity and ability to explore their sexuality than others. Through a lack of understanding, education and a general lack of services, disabled people frequently cannot access the support that would make it possible for them to make the sorts of choices about their lifestyles that most of us take for granted.

As part of our campaign, we run the Love Lounge, an online forum providing free advice on all things sex, love and disability. We also have free downloadable resources. As a user-led charity, our aim is to change the way people view disability, which often involves removing the 'fear factor' that so often surrounds the subject. We support businesses to be more inclusive by providing disability awareness training, British Sign Language workshops and accessibility audits, amongst other things.

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#undressingdisability



**UNDRESSING
DISABILITY**

enhance the uk

CHANGING SOCIETY'S VIEWS ON DISABILITY