

Unsafe sex

Unsafe sex is when there is any sort of anal, oral or vaginal sexual contact without using a male or female condom or any other protection. Most STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) are transmitted during unprotected sexual intercourse.

Unprotected sexual penetrations -introduction of the penis inside the genitals of another person-, either anal or vaginal, present the highest risk of STD transmission, although these infections can also be transmitted through unprotected oral sex -when the mouth is in contact with genitals- or through oral anal sex -when the mouth is in contact with the anus.

People practicing oral sex sometimes like to use flavored condoms. If you have anal sex, it is very important to use a condom with water-based lubricant and to avoid oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline, which can damage the latex of the condom. Also, nonoxynol-9 spermicides are not recommended for they can cause irritations and facilitate the transmission of HIV and other infections.

Sex with HIV- people or people whose status is unknown

If you are HIV+ and you have sex with HIV- people or people whose status is unknown, the best way to protect them against HIV and protect yourself against possible STDs is to use a condom. Even if anti-HIV drugs have suppressed your viral load to undetectable blood levels, you can still transmit HIV to other people for there is still a sufficient quantity of virus in the sperm and vaginal secretions.

Sex with HIV+ people

If you are HIV+ and you have sex with other HIV+ people, it is highly recommended and much safer to use a condom during sexual intercourse, for the following reasons:

You will avoid unwanted pregnancies. For serodiscordant couples -when one of the partners only is HIV+, the use of condoms during pregnancy and breast-feeding will allow the baby to avoid getting infected.

You will avoid getting infected by new HIV strains which might cause the failure of a treatment which could have been efficient. Indeed several studies have proved that there is a risk of cross-contamination with different HIV strains which could be more aggressive than the infection and resistant to HIV drugs.

You will also avoid getting or transmitting other sexually transmitted diseases.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

Bacteria-caused MSTs, such as gonorrhea or chlamydia, can

be treated easily and efficiently in both most of HIV+ and HIV- people, if they are detected and treated. Premature treatment interruption can lead to sterility problems and sometimes to internal organ deterioration. Syphilis, particularly in people whose immune system has been damaged, can be hard to diagnose and treat. This MST can be more aggressive when the immune system is damaged.

Viral STDs such as genital herpes or genital warts are not curable even in HIV- people. They can be controlled with a treatment but can appear again in the future and be harder to control. In HIV+ people they can appear more frequently and be harder to treat. Genital herpes is associated to a higher risk of HIV transmission, especially in the case of ulcers. Some HIV strains which cause genital warts are associated to cervical and anal genital cancer.

Hepatitis A and B, and -not as easily- hepatitis C, can be transmitted during unprotected sexual intercourse and present more complications in people living with HIV. Hepatitis can have serious effects on the liver, which will sometimes reduce the number of treatment options and be responsible for tolerance problems.

Vaccines are available against hepatitis A and B, although not against hepatitis C. They can usually be obtained in HIV treatment centers. It is especially recommended for men having sex with men to be vaccinated against hepatitis A and B. After, you will have to do regular immunity controls to make sure the vaccine is still efficient against hepatitis A and B.

Some of the opportunistic infections that affect HIV+ people are sexually transmitted. For instance there are good reasons to believe that Kaposi sarcoma is sexually transmitted through a certain type of herpes. HIV- and HIV+ people can get intestinal infections such as Giardia, Entamoeba (little parasites that settle in the abdomen and can cause diarrhea), Cryptosporidium and Microsporidium, which can be transmitted through unprotected anal/oral contact or any type of sexual act involving a contact between the mouth and contaminated stool. They can result in serious diarrhea, above all in people whose immune system is seriously damaged.

HIV+ people who also have STDs show higher HIV levels in their genital fluids, which makes the risk of transmitting HIV higher during sex. It is recommended to people with an active sexual life to do regular sexual health tests. Many treatment centers have departments specialized in sexual health, where tests and free treatments are confidentially available.