

This sheet features information on STDs and HIV, on hygiene and on which sexual practices involve the greatest risk of STDs and HIV, and some notes about the stigma involved in sex work.

STDs/HIV

STDs are infections that can be transmitted during sexual relations, whether through skin contact or through female or male fluids. Of these infections HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, deserves a chapter on its own. It is a virus that may not produce symptoms for years. People with HIV are not necessarily of any specific type of person. For HIV to be transmitted, a fluid is required to transport it: blood, semen, pre-ejaculatory fluid, vaginal fluid, or maternal milk. It must then have a "gateway" through which it can enter the body: vagina, anus, mucous membranes, wounds, or lesions.

Many women who engage in prostitution are torn between care of their sexual health and paranoia. Could this be because we have come to believe that prostitution necessarily involves disease, which is what some of society thinks? Although a change of mentality is required, in the meantime what matters is information. Clearly, we are not more prone to catching diseases because we engage in prostitution. The chance of catching an STD is related to the risk of the practices we engage in and with general healthcare and not in any way to our profession.

Hygiene

We all know that being clean is a good thing but sometimes carry it to an extreme and achieve the opposite of what we want. Too much washing and too many ovules cause irritation, weaken our natural defences and, rather than reducing risks, increase them. Indeed, risks increase with the constant use of hygiene products. We recommend that you neither use medicines (ovules, creams) as methods of intimate hygiene, nor use too many vaginal douches, which eventually produce dryness. Forget iodine preparations and enemas! A little pH neutral soap on the outer zone is more than enough.

Be careful when using sponges to obstruct menstrual blood. The ideal thing is to rest, although we are aware that is not always possible. However, never leave a sponge in for too long. Change it every few hours or, better still, use it only while sexual intercourse lasts. Remember too that you must still use either a male or female condom, whichever you prefer. Sponges do not provide protection from STDs, HIV or, of course, unwanted pregnancies.

Practices

The different sexual practices we engage in involve different risks. What matters is being suitably informed so we can take the decisions that we think are right in each situation. Choose practices with which you feel comfortable. Remember that it is you who draws the line and it is not negotiable.

Of all practices, the ones that involve the greatest risk of transmission of STDs and HIV are those that include anal and/or vaginal penetration. This does not only apply to genitals, but also to sex toys, which means not sharing them (be selfish!) without first covering them with latex gloves or with a simple condom. Male oral sex without a condom involves a medium-level risk; to reduce it, do not let him ejaculate in your mouth and do not irritate the zone either before or after. In practice, this means neither brushing your teeth nor using mouthwashes.

You can find more information on the sheet [Infovihtal #76: HIV transmission facts](#).

Stigma

Obsessive cleanliness or the idea that we "spread disease" very often stems from the notion that the female sex is dirty, or that the vagina is an odd sort of place that needs to be "cleaned". Equally as harmful is society's view of prostitution, which comes from stories that are repeated time and time again and make us feel guilty. Perhaps the time has come to make up new stories about respect for our bodies and our sexuality.

The stigma associated with prostitution weighs us down with the guiltiest of secrets. To counteract this, we should remind ourselves that we are worthy of respect, that there are many of us and that we are not completely alone. That is exactly what preventing sexually transmitted diseases and HIV means and is what is meant by the idea of non-discrimination. It means women who are able to choose, and to respect and care for themselves.

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