

19. Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)



Objectives

By the end of this session, group members will be able to:

- Define STI.
- List ways to prevent STI transmission.
- List symptoms of STIs.



Background notes

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections transmitted by sexual contact with an infected partner. STIs are some of the most common diseases in Kenya, particularly among young people. HIV is an STI that leads to AIDS, which is fatal. In addition to HIV, there are more than 20 other diseases that can be sexually transmitted.

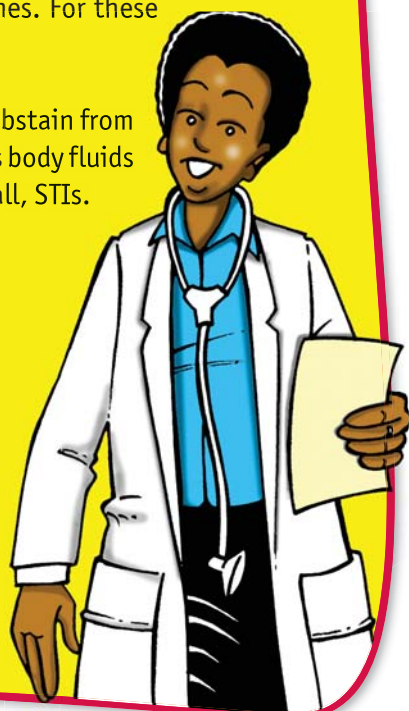
A sexually transmitted infection happens when bacteria, viruses, or other germs pass from one person to another. STIs can cause serious health problems, including not being able to get pregnant (or get a woman pregnant), pain, cancer, and in some cases, death. Also, some STIs can be transmitted to infants during pregnancy or birth.

It is possible to catch an STI even after only one act of sexual intercourse with an infected person. Some STIs can no longer be treated successfully with the medicines that were used in the past, because the germs that cause the disease are now used to the medicines. For these reasons, STIs are becoming more common in many areas.

The only completely effective way to prevent infection with an STI is to abstain from oral, anal, and vaginal sexual intercourse. Contact with another person's body fluids can result in STI infection. Condoms can protect against many, but not all, STIs.

Signs and symptoms of STIs

- Redness or soreness of the sex organs.
- Pain at urination or cloudy or strong-smelling urine.
- A sore or blisters on or near the sex organs, anus, or inside the mouth.
- A lot of itching or a rash.
- Abdominal cramping/pain.
- A fever and an overall sick feeling.
- A sexual partner with symptoms.



If you have STI symptoms:

- Go to a health centre for testing and treatment as soon as possible.
- Finish all of the medicine you receive.
- Ask your partner to be tested as well.
- Abstain from sex or practice safe sex until both you and your partner finish your treatment.



Session guide

1. Facilitate a discussion by asking group members the following questions:
 - What are the signs and symptoms of STIs? (Answers include: redness or soreness of the sex organs, pain when urinating (mostly with men), strong smelling or cloudy urine, unusual discharge from the penis or vagina, sores or blisters on or around the sex organs, mouth, or anus, a sexual partner with symptoms.)
 - What are the two most effective ways to avoid STIs? (Answers should include: abstain from sexual intercourse of any kind, use condoms every time you have intercourse, or be faithful to one faithful partner.)
 - What three things should you do if you are worried that you have been infected with an STI? (Answers should include: seek medical treatment right away, inform your sexual partner(s), and abstain from sexual contact until there is no evidence of infection.)
 - How could you bring up using condoms if you were to have sexual intercourse with a partner you cared about? How would you feel if your partner brought up condom use when you were about to have sex? What would you say to him or her?



Main points

- Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections transmitted by sexual contact with an infected partner.
 - STIs are some of the most common diseases in Kenya, especially among young people.
- HIV is an STI that leads to AIDS. In addition to HIV, there are more than 20 other diseases that can be sexually transmitted.
- The only way to prevent STI is to abstain from oral, anal, and vaginal sexual intercourse. Condoms can protect against many, but not all, STIs.
 - It is important to go to a health facility if you think you have an STI. Be sure to finish all of the medicine you receive and ask your partner to be tested as well.



Activity: STIs – True or false

1. Ask group members to stand in the middle of the meeting space.
2. Explain that you will read a statement. If they think it is true they should remain standing. If they think it is false they should sit down.
3. After each statement ask those standing to say why they think it is true. Then ask those sitting why they think it is false.
4. After each side has had a chance to explain their position, read the answer.
5. Ask everyone to stand up again and read the next statement.
6. Follow the same instructions for each statement you read.

1. A person can always tell if she or he has an STI.

False. People can and do have STIs without having any symptoms. Women often have STIs without symptoms because their reproductive organs are internal, but men may also have no symptoms. People with HIV have no symptoms for some time, even years, after infection.

2. With the right medicines, all STIs except HIV can be cured.

False. Genital warts and herpes, which are two kinds of STIs caused by viruses, cannot be cured at the present time.

3. The organisms that cause STIs can only enter the body through either the woman's vagina or the man's penis.

False. STI bacteria and viruses can enter the body through any mucus membranes, including the vagina, penis, anus, mouth, and in some rare cases, the eyes. HIV can also enter the body when injected into the bloodstream from needles that have been used by others and were not sterilized. It can also be passed from mother to child during pregnancy, delivery, or through breastfeeding.

4. It is good to clean yourself after having sexual intercourse.

True. While personal cleanliness alone cannot prevent STIs, washing away your and your partner's body fluids right after intercourse is good hygiene. Washing does not prevent pregnancy or stop HIV or other STIs from entering the body.

5. It is possible to contract some STIs from kissing.

True. It is rare, but possible to be infected by syphilis through kissing if the infected person has small sores in or around the mouth. The herpes virus can be spread by kissing if sores are present.

6. Only people who have sexual contact can get an STI.

False. Babies can get STIs such as herpes, gonorrhoea, and HIV in the womb or during delivery or breastfeeding.

7. Condoms are the most effective protection against STIs.

False. Abstinence from sexual intercourse is the best way to prevent the spread of STIs. Condoms are the next best thing, but only abstinence is 100 percent effective.

8. Using latex condoms can help prevent the spread of STIs.

True. Latex condoms can help prevent the spread of STIs, but they must be used correctly and for every sexual act. Latex condoms are not 100 percent effective because they can occasionally break or come off during intercourse. Lambskin condoms do not protect against STIs and should not be used. The only 100 percent effect way to prevent STIs is to abstain from sexual activity.

9. A woman using oral contraceptives should still make her partner use a condom to protect against STIs.

True. Oral contraceptives do not prevent STIs. A condom would be necessary for protection unless both partners know they are faithful to one another and are currently infection-free.

10. Abstinence is the only method of contraception that is 100% risk free.

True. Avoiding sexual intercourse of any kind is the only way to avoid pregnancy or an STI.

11. Once you have had gonorrhoea, you cannot get it again.

False. A person can get gonorrhoea as many times as he or she has sex with an infected person. It is important therefore that anyone who is treated for gonorrhoea or any other STI makes sure that his or her sexual partner be treated as well.

12. There is still a big risk of HIV transmission with condoms, since condoms have holes that are large enough for the virus to pass through.

False. Some groups have reported inaccurate research findings that suggest HIV can pass through condoms, but it is not true. Latex condoms have been dipped in latex at least twice and the HIV virus is too big to pass through any pores. There is a manufacturing process that is followed when making condoms.

13. You will not get HIV if your girlfriend or boyfriend is clean.

False. A person's risk of HIV cannot be determined by looking at a person and checking her or his reputation. Some people get HIV when they have only had sex once or with one partner.

14. Having sex with a virgin cleans a man of HIV and cures him.

False. This is no cure for HIV. Having sex with a virgin only risks giving HIV to that person and will not cure the man.

15. If you have unprotected sex with a person who has HIV you will definitely catch it.

False. Not everyone who has unprotected sex with someone with HIV will catch it. Some people can stay in a relationship with a person who has HIV for a long time and not catch it, others catch it the first time they have sex with someone who is infected. Catching HIV is always a risk, but it is important not to assume that just because a person's partner has HIV that they will have it too.