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The role of preventative care in combating sexually transmitted infections

World Health Assembly (WHA)

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Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections continue to pose a global health issue, affecting over 1 million individuals worldwide according to the World Health Organization. Without proper medical care, STIs can develop and cause serious health issues, some of which can even be life-threatening. The most common issues are unusual bumps, discharge or pain, but some STIs can also lead to infertility or cancer. Most STIs do not show symptoms right away, so they can spread without being noticed. Approximately 88 million people have become infected with HIV and 44 million have died from AIDS-related illnesses. 1.1 billion people have suffered from other STIs, of which 108 thousand people died.

There are many ways to prevent the spread of STIs, such as vaccinations, condoms or medication. Despite the availability of these effective preventative care methods, they are not always implemented. World inequality, poor education and cultural stigmas result in late diagnosis, more infections and more severe health problems. Not only in low-resource settings but also in situations with many resources, this continues to cause problems.

Definition of key terms

Sexually transmitted infection (STI)

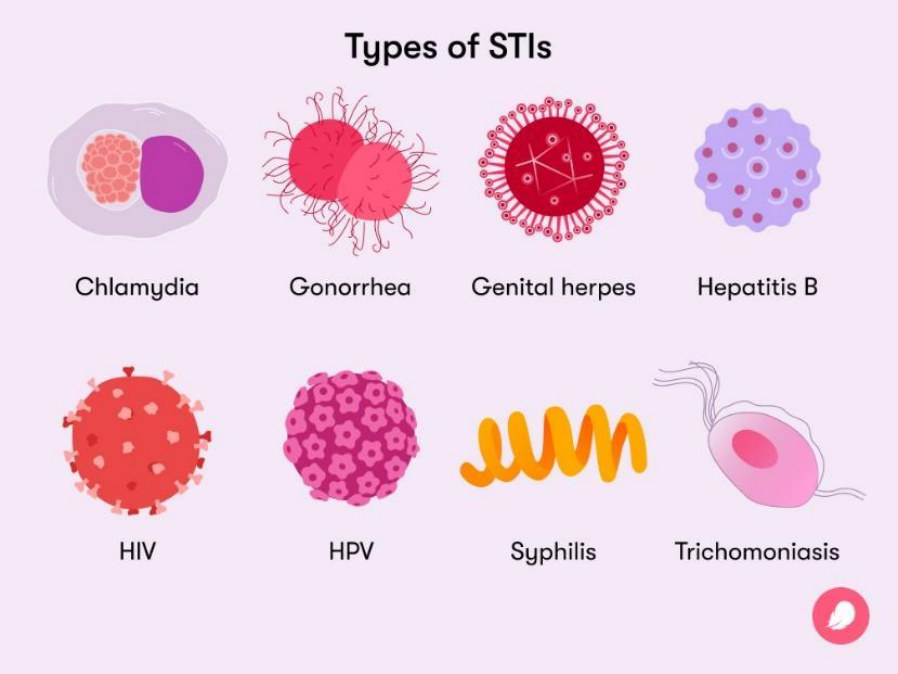
A disease caused by infection with certain viruses, bacteria, fungi or parasites that can be passed from person to person through sexual contact. STIs can spread through various sexual acts or the exchange of body fluids. Some types of STIs can be transmitted by kissing an infected person. It is even possible to pass an STI from a mother to a child during or after pregnancy. An STI can evolve into an STD, causing serious problems.

Sexually transmitted disease (STD)

If an infection of an STI has led to symptoms of disease, it is called a Sexually transmitted disease (STD). STDs are harder to cure, but easier to spot, because they cause symptoms and health problems.

Stigma

A stigma is a strong feeling of disapproval that a majority of people have about something. Regarding sexual culture and STIs, there is a stigma that these topics are private and therefore should not be talked about. This stigma also includes the fear of taking safety measures or seeking help from professionals.



General Overview

Global rates and statistics

There are more than 30 types of STDs that are being transmitted through sexual acts or from mother to child. Most STIs are bacterial or viral diseases. Bacterial STIs are curable using medication. It is important that these are recognised quickly, so they will not evolve into incurable diseases. The most common bacterial diseases are syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia and trichomoniasis.
Viral STIs are not curable. The patient will carry the virus for life, but the virus will not always be active and cause harmful symptoms. Through medication and treatments, the patient will not have any health issues and it is even possible to reduce or eliminate transmission rates. The most common viral STIs are hepatitis B, herpes simplex virus (HSV), HIV and HPV.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), over 1 million cases of curable STIs are acquired daily, with a majority of cases being asymptomatic. 2020 saw an estimated 374 million new cases of people aged 15-49 infected with one of the 4 major curable STIs.
Additionally, over 520 million people were living with genital herpes and approximately 300 million women suffered from an HPV infection.
In 2024 there were approximately 40.8 million people infected with HIV and 630 thousand died that year of HIV-related illnesses. In total 44 million people died of HIV over the years. In 2015 other STIs infected 1.1 billion people of which 108 thousand people died.

Causes of STIs

On a physical level, STIs are caused by bacteria, viruses or parasites. They are transmitted through sexual acts. But there are multiple social or cultural causes why STIs keep spreading, which form a big problem for healthcare and prevention.

Sexual Behaviour

Our sexual behaviour is changing. Mainly the increasing number of bed partners is leading to more STIs. More cultures are moving away from the no sex before marriage principle. People are experimenting at a young age with multiple people or one-night stands. This increases the risk of an STI transmission.

Another problem is the decline of protected sex. According to the WHO condom use has declined from 70% to 60% among men and from 63% to 57% among women since 2014. Without protection an STI can be transmitted. This decrease also leads to more unintended pregnancies at a young age.

Limited healthcare access or education

Underdeveloped healthcare systems have limited access to preventive care supplies. Without enough resources, it is not possible to provide enough testing and treatment for everyone who needs it. When there are not enough testing kits, the STI will spread, increasing the shortage of supplies.
Most resources are available in urban areas, with clinics and hospitals located in big cities. For people living in rural places it is hard to acquire proper care due to travel distance, money, time or physical inability.

With bad education on the topic, individuals have limited knowledge of STIs. Without this knowledge, they can't take precautions or recognise symptoms. When the STI is not identified, they cause worse health issues, which are harder to cure. It will also have a greater chance to keep spreading without knowing it, endangering others.

Stigmas and cultural beliefs

Talking about sexual health is seen as taboo in most cultures. In many religious or traditional cultures it is even seen as shameful or inflicts fear. Having sexual health issues or seeking help is suppressed. Symptoms are not being recognised, because people are not used to talking about them or don't even know what the symptoms look like. STD tests or proper treatments are less likely to be used, causing the STD to develop into worse forms, with worse symptoms.

The stigma is particularly big for women and minority groups, such as members of the LGBTQ+ community. With unequal social relationships and power dynamics, these groups are more vulnerable.

This stigma in combination with bad health care asses results in a high STI rate. Nevertheless, stigma is also a big problem in well-developed countries.

Effects of STIs

Having a sexually transmitted disease is not always harmful. Often you will first carry the infection without showing any symptoms. Because the STI can spread without knowing you have one, it is important to prevent infections instead of curing them. When an STI develops into an STD it will have life-changing effects. Every STD will have different symptoms and health issues, depending on the individual. Most STIs will eventually cause pain, unusual discharge, fevers, or other symptoms. When an STI is not treated right for a long time, it can cause more drastic issues, such as infertility, cancers or loss of crucial organs to live a normal life. These symptoms can change a person's life forever or end in death.

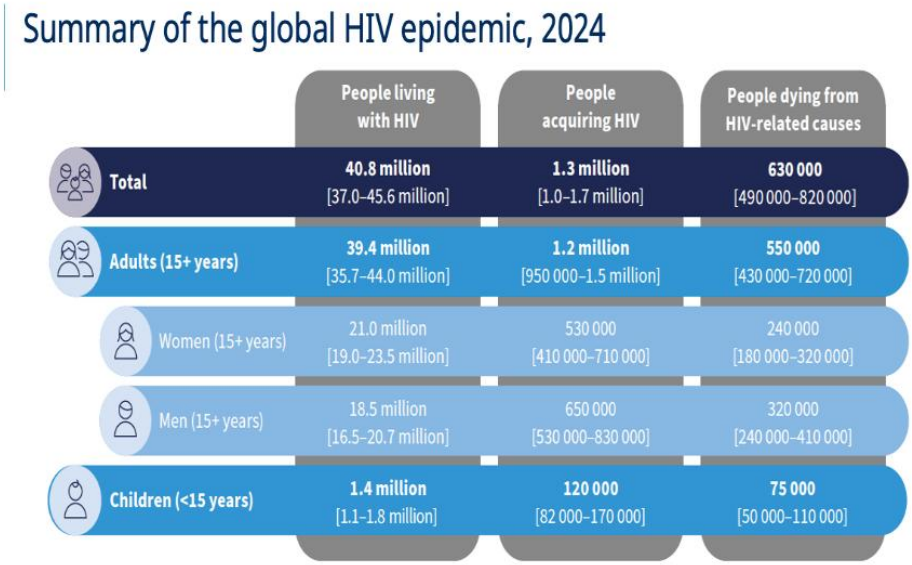
Common symptoms for the main STIs are as follows:

Chlamydia often causes genital infections, genital discharge and pain during urination.

Hepatitis B will eventually cause vomiting, tiredness and nausea.

Syphilis leads to rash, weight loss, a sore throat and headaches.

The main risk of HIV is that the infection makes the chance of getting other STIs bigger and these infections can get worse. Therefore, HIV is most known and combating HIV is a priority for combating STIs. Other symptoms include weakening the immune system, fevers, rash, diarrhoea and eventually cancers.



Types of preventative care

Barrier methods

Using protection during sex is the easiest way to prevent STIs. When a condom is used correctly, infection cannot occur. It will prevent the transfer of fluids that could cause an STI. Male condoms are the most commonly used versions, but female condoms also prevent the spread of STIs. Reducing the number of your sexual partners will also reduce the spread.

Vaccines

A vaccination reduces the risk of illness and makes a community immune to the bacteria or virus. This reduces the spread of STIs, even among non-vaccinated individuals, because the chance of getting in contact with an STI is smaller. A vaccination is usually administered just before puberty, primarily to women, but also to men. Vaccinations are available for HPV, Hepatitis A and Hepatitis B.

Screening

Before there are big impactful symptoms of the disease, a person could still be infected with an STI. It could be important to identify the STI to prevent irreversible harm and to limit it's spread. Through screening an STI is identified before any symptoms appear. Screening is done by testing blood, urine or other relevant body fluids. Testing is often done at a doctor's office or health clinic, but it is also possible to do a test at home. It is recommended to get screened annually for several diseases if sexually active. For people older than 25 years, it is recommended to get screened at least once. Though it depends on personal status such as sex, age and sexual behaviour.

Medical circumcision

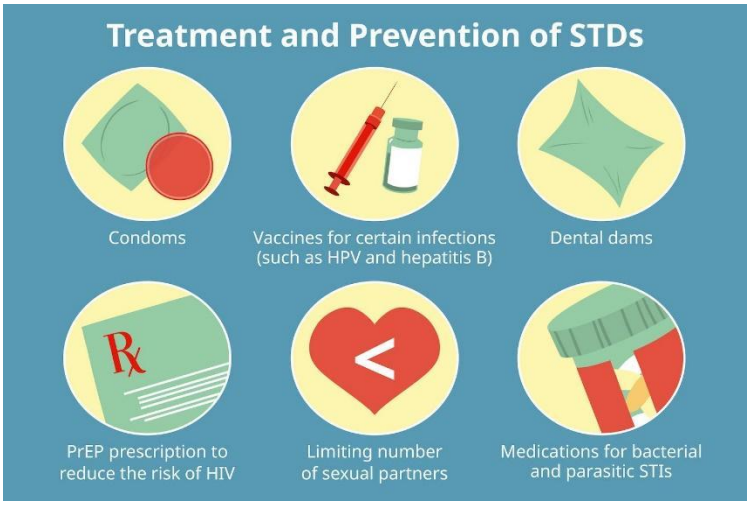
Voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) is a medical procedure performed on men in which a small piece of skin is removed from the male genitals. A medical circumcision reduces the risk of men getting HIV by 60 %. It also reduces the risk of other STIs.

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)

PrEP is the use of preventive medication before infection with an STI. There are several types of medicine that could help with the prevention of STIs. They are used to prevent the spread of diseases in people not infected with an STI.

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)

PEP is the use of preventive medication after infection with an STI. PEP is used to prevent the infection from getting worse or becoming an STD with dangerous symptoms.



Major parties involved

European Union

Healthcare is a national responsibility in the European Union. However, they do help countries with guidelines and data collection. Reports in 2022 show that the STI rates are still rising in Europe. A 48% rise in Syphilis cases and 16% in chlamydia cases. This indicates that even with good healthcare systems the battle against STIs is not easy. The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) collects data and identifies risks. Furthermore, the EU has multiple guidance and strategy reports regarding regular testing, STI awareness and vaccine programmes.

South Africa

South Africa has the highest rates of STIs in the world and is the epicentre of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. South Africa had 7.7 million people living with HIV and 50.000 deaths due to HIV in 2023. The county has focused on HIV prevention. They concentrated on Prep distribution, social behaviour change and testing supplies. Working mainly with community and locally based programmes.

Despite the lowering rate of infections, South Africa still deals with 150.000 new HIV infections a year. In 2010 this was more than 320.000 new infections a year. The county also deals with funding problems, getting cuts from USAID at the beginning of 2025. These funding cuts could lead to devastating effects and a lot of deaths.

UNAIDS

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS has focused on the worldwide coordination of the HIV pandemic since 1996. It provides advocacy and fundraising to support individuals affected by HIV/Aids. One of the goals is informing about and preventing the transmission of the virus. UNAIDS makes guidelines for governments and explores the possibilities of preventive care. UNAIDS is also one of the most important parties involved in researching and collecting data on STIs. With this data, the WHO makes decisions and guidelines.

UNFPA

The United Nations Population Fund is a UN fund focusing on sexual and reproductive health. Their goal is to achieve equality and free choice regarding reproductive health and to ensure safety.
One of the important subgoals is to avoid spreading STIs. They fund preventative care supplies, such as condoms and testing kits. They also address the importance of preventive care through different strategies. The focus is on vulnerable population groups such as sex workers, young girls and homosexuals. UNFPA works with governments, communities and organisations to remove structural and cultural barriers in order to make healthcare easier. They also fund campaigns to remove the cultural stigmas and end inequalities.

Timeline of events

1981 June	Global pandemic of HIV/AIDS begins
1996 January	Creation of UNAIDS (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDs
2000 September	Un Millennium Goals is created with goal 6 focusing on combating HIV/Aids, Malaria, and other diseases
2001 June 25-27th	United Nations General Assembly special session on HIV/Aids, agreeing on global commitment to combat the HIV epidemic.
2002 January 22nd	Formation of The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria.
2006 June (USA) 2007 September (EU)	HPV Vaccine Approved in USA. Other countries followed in the months after.
2016 January 1st	Sustainable development goals officially come into force, with goal 3 focusing on "good health and wellbeing", including the sub-target of ending the HIV/AIDS epidemic by 2030 and combating hepatitis.
2016 October	WHO Publication of the Global Health Sector Strategy on Sexually Transmitted Infections for 2016-2021. Focused on LEDCs as well as marginalised groups.
2020-2022	Covid-19 pandemic leads to increasing rates of std's
2022 July 18th	WHO Publication of updated Global health sector strategies on, respectively, HIV, viral hepatitis, and sexually transmitted infections for the period 2022-2030.

Possible solutions

National/International Awareness campaigns

Having nationwide awareness campaigns on the causes and effects of STDs can normalise taking STI tests or using preventative care. It's important to not only offer preventive care but also make sure that people will use the possibilities. Campaigns can also help to de-stigmatise the topic. It can encourage safe and open discussion on the topics of safe sex and regular testing. This would benefit the people that are affected, by assuring them that having an STI isn't something to hide or be ashamed of, but rather something that can be prevented and treated.

Enhancing the accessibility of testing or other preventative care

Screening is an important step in the prevention of STIs. Enhancing the accessibility of testing will make it easier to detect infections early on and to promote getting tested. Early diagnoses allow more effective treatments and help individuals adjust their behaviour to prevent further transmissions.

One strategy is to increase the number of screening facilities, making them more accessible. Another approach is to invest in at-home testing kits. This method allows individuals to check themselves for STIs at home. It removes the shame often associated with having or testing for an STI, which may encourage people to test more frequently.

The last way to improve the accessibility of STI tests is to invest in mobile clinics. These clinics go to patients to let them get tested. Instead of requiring people in remote areas to travel long distances to the city, care can be brought to them. For instance, a mobile clinic could visit a small village to get the entire community tested. This prevents the spread of infections within the village and minimises the risk for communities surrounding it.

Sexual education

Sexual education is not only helpful to understand your own body and sexual preferences, but also to create a safer and healthier culture. Knowledge of the causes and harms of STIs is important to act safely and prevent STIs.

There is a big stigma around sexual behaviour and STIs. The stigma causes bad testing rates, fear of talking about sexual partners and anxiety to inform people around you about an STI. Implementing sexual education in schools, community places or on social media could improve the knowledge of STIs. With more knowledge early on, people can change their behaviour and take precautionary measures. It will also help with removing the stigma. When people are educated on the topic, it could normalise talking about precautions or infections with the people around you.

Social media could be a good option for reaching the sexually active population. Social media is mostly used by adolescents and young adults. These groups are most vulnerable to STIs due to their behaviour. Influencers have a big influence on these groups and are commonly a big example for their actions. When social media is implemented in the right way, it could change the stigma and culture around STIs.

Subsidising vaccinations

Vaccines are seen to be very effective against the STI pandemic. Implementing vaccination programs at a young age will lower the chance of getting an STI. Vaccines train our immune system to recognise and fight against STIs before they can harm us. With a high vaccination rate, there will be group immunity. This will not only protect the vaccinated but also people without a vaccination. An STI is less likely to spread because there are fewer people to infect.

Vaccinations are gender-specific. Different approaches could work better or worse depending on gender. Vaccine programs are more used and more effective on women, but vaccinating men is also very important. Just because they have less chance of getting an STI doesn't mean they are immune.

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