

Common Sexually Transmitted Infections in Women



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KEYWORDS

- Sexually transmitted infections • Vaginal infections • Women's health • Cervicitis • Vaginal discharge

KEY POINTS

- The spread of sexually transmitted infections remains a significant public health issue in the United States.
- Screening women for infections of the vagina and cervix is essential because untreated infections may result in complications that have current and long-term health consequences and impact quality of life.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently updated the Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines in 2015 to provide the most current evidence-based guide for screening individuals across the lifespan for infections.

INTRODUCTION

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) updated the Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines in 2015 to provide the most current evidence-based recommendations for screening and treating individuals across the lifespan. Prevalence rates among adolescents and young adults in the United States are highest among females for chlamydia, gonorrhea, and human papillomavirus (HPV).^{1,2}

The spread of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remains a significant health problem.¹ Approximately 20 million new STIs are diagnosed each year in the United States, of which almost half of them are identified in young people ages 15 to 24 year old.² In addition to age disparities, gender disparities also exist because women are diagnosed more frequently with STIs than men.² Both the age and gender

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disparities are of critical importance, because untreated STIs can lead to long-term health consequences for women, including infertility, ectopic pregnancy, chronic pelvic pain, cervical cancer, and chronic liver disease.^{1,3}

Social, economic, and behavioral implications affecting the spread of STIs have been identified in the United States. The most important social factor impacting the spread of STIs in the United States is the stigma associated with discussing sex and STI screening.⁴ Race and ethnicity factors associated with high rates of STIs include being African American, Hispanic, American Indian, or Alaskan Native.^{2,3} Disadvantaged socioeconomic status populations and populations associated with high-risk behaviors are also at an increased risk of contracting an STI.³

National goals for reducing the spread of STIs and for increasing prevention of STIs are included in the Healthy People 2020 (HP2020) document. Health care providers play an important role in reducing STI rates by bridging knowledge gaps and removing access barriers. The Sexually Transmitted Diseases Treatment Guidelines document is an essential resource for meeting the HP2020 goals. This article summarizes critical information for health care providers to safely and effectively prevent and manage STIs for women across the lifespan.

BACTERIAL VAGINOSIS

Screening and Diagnosing

Screening for bacterial vaginosis (BV) is recommended for women presenting with vaginal discharge or odor. The diagnosis in the clinical setting is most often based on the Amsel criteria, which includes the presence of at least three of the following: grayish-white vaginal discharge, pH greater than 4.5, positive whiff test for a fishy odor in the presence of potassium hydroxide, or observation of clue cells under microscopy.¹ Researchers often use the Nugent criteria to diagnose BV using a gram-stained smear of discharge. Commercial diagnostic tests are also available for diagnosing BV.

Incidence/Prevalence

BV is the most common cause of discharge among women of reproductive age.¹ The most recent US National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey study noted the prevalence of BV at 29% among the general population in reproductive age women. The highest rates were reported among African American women followed by Mexican-American women and white women.⁵ BV is predominantly diagnosed in sexually active women.

Risk Factors

Sexual activity, douching, and a lack of lactobacillus in the vagina are common risk factors for BV. A diagnosis of BV increases the risks for acquisition of other STIs, including human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), gonorrhea, chlamydia, and herpes simplex virus (HSV).¹ Therefore, women diagnosed with BV should be screened for STIs.

Treatment

Treatment is recommended in symptomatic women. In addition to the treatments listed in **Box 1**, recent studies have provided promising outcomes with the addition of lactic acid vaginal gel and probiotics, such as *Lactobacillus reuteri* and *Lactobacillus rhamnosus*, in the treatment of recurrent BV.⁶⁻⁸

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