

# *Improving Patient Outcomes for Sexually Transmitted Infections*

**A Toolkit for Health Care Providers**



**OASH**

Office of  
Infectious Disease  
and HIV/AIDS Policy



## Sexually transmitted infections (STI) remain a pressing public health challenge in the United States, contributing to immediate health concerns and long-term chronic conditions.

If not treated, infections such as human papillomavirus (HPV), hepatitis B, chlamydia, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) can lead to serious outcomes like infertility, cervical cancer, liver cancer, and other chronic diseases. Fortunately, many of these conditions can be prevented or managed through vaccination, testing, and timely treatment.



Health care providers play a critical role in reducing STIs. The Office of Infectious Disease and HIV/AIDS Policy (OIDP) designed this toolkit to support providers in facilitating open and honest conversations with patients and to help providers increase awareness among patients about the importance of STI testing as part of routine care. By promoting testing, encouraging regular dialogue, and normalizing conversations about STI risks, testing, and care, providers can help avert missed opportunities for prevention and early diagnosis and improve long-term health outcomes.

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# Facilitating the STI Conversation with Patients



**Many patients feel hesitant or uncomfortable discussing STIs, which can lead to serious and chronic health conditions.**

Open, informed conversations about intimate health can improve trust, encourage routine testing, and support better health outcomes. It's also important to stay up-to-date on the latest STI diagnosis and treatment guidelines to provide patients with the best care possible. As a health care provider, you play a key role in making these discussions feel normal, informative, and supportive. Here are some tips and tools to get the conversation started.



## Helpful Tips for Talking About STI Testing

- ▶ **Follow a structured approach:** [The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's \(CDC\) 5P's approach](#) (Partners, Practices, Protection from STIs, Past History of STIs, and Pregnancy Intention) helps guide effective conversations.
- ▶ **Normalize STI testing:** Frame it as part of routine health care, like blood pressure checks or cholesterol screenings.
- ▶ **Use neutral, nonjudgmental language:** Avoid language that may imply risk or shame.
- ▶ **Focus on health and prevention:** Emphasize the benefits of knowing one's STI status.
- ▶ **Make it brief but impactful:** A simple, confident recommendation can go a long way.



## Explaining the Difference Between STIs and STDs

Patients may still use the term “sexually transmitted disease” (STD), but STI is the preferred term. Language matters and there is some evidence that using STI is less stigmatizing than STD. In addition, it's important for patients to understand that although STIs are asymptomatic, they are still transmittable. Here's a simple way to explain the difference:

- ▶ An **infection** happens first—when a virus, bacteria, or parasite enters the body, and the immune system starts responding.
- ▶ A **disease** develops only if the infection causes symptoms or complications.



*When talking with patients, consider saying:*

“We use ‘STI’ because many infections don't cause symptoms but can still be passed to partners. Testing helps us catch and treat them early, just like other routine health checks.”

Here are some tips for getting the conversation started, helping patients feel comfortable, and handling common patient concerns.

### Opening the Discussion

- “I ask all my patients about STI testing as part of routine care. Have you ever been tested for STIs? Would you like to be tested?”
- “STI testing is a regular part of staying healthy, just like checking blood pressure or cholesterol. Let’s discuss what makes sense for you today.”
- “Many STIs don’t have symptoms but can still impact your health. Regular testing is a simple way to stay informed and protect your well-being.”

### Normalizing STI Care and Reducing Discomfort

- “STIs are common, and testing is simply a way to take care of yourself, like any other health checkup.”
- “Testing doesn’t mean there’s a problem—it’s just about staying informed and healthy.”
- “We recommend STI testing for everyone who is sexually active. It’s a normal part of health care.”

### Encouraging Action and Next Steps

- “Let’s go ahead and do an STI test today—it’s quick, easy, and gives us a full picture of your health.”
- “If today isn’t the right time, we can schedule a test for later or discuss at-home options.”
- “Regular STI testing is one of the best ways to protect your health. Let’s make a plan that works for you.”

### Handling Common Patient Concerns

- **Patient:** “Will you test for all STIs?”
- **Provider:** “Not all STIs are included in routine testing. A standard STI panel usually tests for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, HIV, and sometimes hepatitis B and C. However, herpes and trichomoniasis are not always included unless requested or symptomatic. HPV testing is typically done for women as part of routine cervical cancer screening.”
- **Patient:** “I’m pregnant—do I need an STI test?”
- **Provider:** “STI testing is an important part of prenatal care, especially as STIs can be asymptomatic. Some STIs can be passed to the baby during pregnancy or birth, leading to birth defects and even death. Early detection and treatment can help prevent complications. We recommend screening for syphilis, HIV, hepatitis B, chlamydia, and gonorrhea during pregnancy.”
- **Patient:** “I don’t live near a hospital or doctor. How can I get testing and treatment if I test positive?”
- **Provider:** “In some cases, testing can be done using at-home kits. If treatment is needed, prescriptions can be sent to a local pharmacy or delivered to your home. We’ll review the options together and choose what works best for you.”
- **Patient:** “Are there ways to prevent STIs besides condoms?”
- **Provider:** “Yes! If you are sexually active, having fewer partners can help prevent STIs. Also agreeing to only have sex with one person who agrees to only have sex with you can prevent STIs. In addition to condoms, [PrEP](#) can help prevent HIV, and [doxy PEP](#) may reduce the risk of some bacterial STIs like syphilis, chlamydia, and gonorrhea. Vaccines are available to prevent HPV and hepatitis B. Practicing abstinence is the surest way to avoid STIs. We can discuss which prevention strategies might be a good fit for you.”

## Final Takeaways

- Emphasizing that STI testing should be a **routine** part of preventive health care can help normalize it.
- Keeping conversations **brief, clear, and supportive** can help patients feel at ease.
- Encouraging **regular testing** supports early detection and treatment, leading to better health outcomes.
- You are a trusted voice—your **confidence and openness** in discussing STIs can set the tone for a patient’s comfort and willingness to engage.
- Ongoing **provider education** is essential to staying informed on best practices for diagnosing and treating STIs effectively.



# Promoting the Importance of STI Testing

The next few pages include content and materials—including sample text for newsletters or websites, posters to hang in the waiting room, and stickers to wear around the office or clinic—that can help create awareness about the importance of STI conversations and regular STI testing.



## Sample Text 1

**Headline:** STI Testing Is Routine Care

**Body copy:** Talking about sexually transmitted infections (STI) with your doctor should be as normal as discussing any other part of your health. Regular STI testing is an important part of your routine care.

STI testing is not just for those who have symptoms—it's a proactive step that can help detect infections early, so treatment can begin as soon as possible.

Not sure where to start? Book an STI screening appointment today and start having this important conversation with your provider regularly. Whether it's STI screenings, prevention options, or anything in between, health care providers are here to help.

Routine testing helps you to take charge of your health and protect your well-being.

Schedule your STI screening with us today or find another STI testing center near you: <https://locator.hiv.gov/>

## Sample Text 2

**Headline:** STI Testing Today for Peace of Mind Tomorrow

**Body copy:** About 1 in 5 people in the United States have a sexually transmitted infection (STI), and some don't even know it. If left untreated, STIs can cause long-term health problems and chronic diseases, including infertility and certain cancers.

Regular testing brings clarity and peace of mind to you and your loved ones. Open conversations and routine testing help protect your health and your partner's health. It's a simple step that helps you stay informed, empowers you to take charge of your well-being, and helps protect others too.

Testing is available nearby, because your health comes first. Schedule your STI screening with us today or find STI testing near you: <https://locator.hiv.gov/>

## Sample Text 3

**Headline:** STI Testing Today for Peace of Mind Tomorrow

**Body copy:** Pregnancy is a time to take extra care of your health, and that includes routine testing for sexually transmitted infections (STI). Talking about STIs with your health care provider is just as normal as discussing blood pressure or nutrition. STI testing is a standard and important part of prenatal care because some infections do not cause symptoms but can affect your pregnancy or your baby if left untreated. Testing helps detect infections early so treatment can begin right away, protecting both you and your growing baby. If you're unsure whether you've been tested, asking a simple question at your next visit, like "Have I been tested for STIs during this pregnancy?" can help start the conversation.

It's a small step that supports a healthy pregnancy and peace of mind. Schedule your STI screening with us today or find STI testing near you: <https://locator.hiv.gov/>



**Test today for a**  
*Healthier*  
*Tomorrow*



**Get tested.  
Get treated.  
Get healthy.**



**OASH**

Stock photo. Posed by model.

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# *Additional Resources*

The following web pages contain more information that may be helpful in preparing for and navigating conversations with patients about STI prevention, testing, and treatment.

- [Clinical Guidance for STIs | Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\) | CDC](#)
- [How to Prevent STIs | Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\) | CDC](#)
- [Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\) | CDC](#)
- [About AtlasPlus | CDC National Center for HIV, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and Tuberculosis Prevention](#)
- [About Congenital Syphilis | Syphilis | CDC](#)
- [About Chlamydia | Chlamydia | CDC](#)
- [About Genital HPV Infection | Sexually Transmitted Infections \(STIs\) | CDC](#)
- [Service Locator](#)





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