

Conditions favourable to sexual health *These strategies do not have a direct impact on HIV transmission, but include different practices and contexts that promote good sexual health and contribute to putting other strategies in place.*



GETTING TESTED REGULARLY FOR STIs

Getting a test or physical examination on a regular basis to detect the presence of a sexually transmitted infection (STI) and initiate appropriate treatment

Description

- Testing makes it possible to detect whether a person has been infected with a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Depending on the STI, the test is carried out using a blood, urine, vaginal, or anal sample or a sample taken from the throat or (in rare cases) the urethra.¹ It's important to tell your health care provider about your sexual practices so that they do the right tests and check the right parts of your body.
- The amount of time that needs to pass between transmission of the infection and when it can be detected by a test (window period) varies depending on the STI.
- STIs may be asymptomatic, i.e., a person can be infected but not have any symptoms or the symptoms can go unrecognized.
- STI testing and any necessary treatment are an HIV prevention strategy because the presence of an untreated STI can increase the risk of contracting or transmitting HIV. An untreated STI can cause the viral load of a person infected with HIV to go up, increasing the risk of HIV transmission.^{2,3}
- Treatment for some STIs can be complicated if you are HIV-positive.³
- Public health regulations (*Loi sur la santé publique*) makes it mandatory for clinics and testing services to declare certain STIs in order to track infections and protect public health. The declaration includes nominative information such as the patient's name, age, health insurance number and home address that are provided to the regional public health director.¹ This information is handled according to strict standards of confidentiality.

Effectiveness

- STI testing and treatment can reduce your risk of HIV infection because an STI can form an entry point for HIV, making it easier for HIV to enter the body.
- An infection with gonorrhea, chlamydia or syphilis can be easily treated with medication.³
- Regular STI testing and treatment can break the chain of transmission and prevent health complications.
- Men who have sex with men should get tested for STIs every year regardless of their sexual practices, or every 3 to 6 months if they report repeated risk factors, have repeated STIs, or have had more than 3 sexual partners in the past 12 months.¹
- Men who have sex with men should get vaccinated against hepatitis A and B because these vaccines are very effective. The vaccines are available free of charge.¹

Accessibility

- In Quebec, STI testing is free and covered by provincial health insurance (RAMQ) when done at a SIDEP (*Services intégrés de dépistage et de prévention des ITSS*), a CLSC, or most clinics. Some clinics may charge fees (e.g. for transporting samples to the lab).
- STI testing is offered in a range of locations such as clinics, hospitals, on-site at community organizations, and through outreach activities.
 - A map of places that offer testing across Quebec can be found on the *Portail VIH/sida du Québec* website : <http://pvsq.org/quebec-carte-des-sites-de-depistage-vih-et-des-itss/>
 - The *Portail Santé Montréal* website has information about STIs and where to go to get tested: <https://www.santemontreal.qc.ca/population/>

- Before you decide which tests to have, your health care provider will make an assessment of different risk factors. Generally, for men who have sex with men, tests for chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and hepatitis B will be recommended.¹

Acceptability

- In the *Mobilise!* survey among men who have sex with men in Montreal, nearly all (94%) of respondents knew about testing and treatment of STIs as a risk reduction strategy.⁵
- In a cross-Canada study among men who have sex with men, 76% of respondents considered STI testing to be an effective strategy for reducing the risk of HIV transmission.⁶
- Among participants who have been tested at SPOT (a community site in Montreal's gay village) since July 2013, 83% got tested for STIs in addition to getting tested for HIV.
- Advantages of STI testing and treatment:
 - Treating an STI reduces the risk of contracting or transmitting HIV.⁷
 - Informs you about the state of your sexual health.⁷
 - For HIV-positive people, avoids an increase in viral load due to an untreated STI.⁷
 - Makes it possible to avoid complications from an untreated infection, such as chronic infection and heart, brain, bone, or liver damage.³
 - Brings peace of mind.⁷
 - Free testing is available, depending on where you get tested.
- Disadvantages of STI testing and treatment:
 - There are no tests for certain STIs such as HPV.
 - Does not offer direct protection against HIV or other STIs.
 - Fees may be charged when getting tested in some clinics.
 - Fees may be charged when receiving the treatment.⁷
 - Some treatments can cause unwanted side effects.⁷
- Obstacles to STI testing and treatment:
 - Not seeing yourself as at risk of having an STI.
 - Not having symptoms or not noticing them.
 - Not knowing where to go to get tested or living far away from where a testing site is located.
 - Having difficulty finding information on the window period for STIs / not knowing when is the right time to get tested.⁷
 - Not being able to get tested as often as desired because your doctor is not available.⁷
 - Finding that certain testing clinics lack anonymity.⁷
 - Finding that the wait time to get the results is too long.⁷
 - Being afraid you will face stigma, discrimination or rejection when you obtain medication at the pharmacy or if you tell a partner.
 - Fear of needles or of giving a sample of blood.

References

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