

You look after the rest of you; don't neglect your sexual health!

By Dr Nneka Nwokolo

Why have a sexual health check up?

These days we are much better at looking after ourselves than, say, our mothers or grandmothers were. Access to better information and technology mean that we are only an app away from booking that day at the spa or ordering the latest detox package from our favourite nutritionist.

Sexual health is just as important as the health of the rest of us, but is often forgotten or neglected. This is sometimes because people don't realize that they might have an infection because they don't think they are at risk, or because many infections don't have symptoms so people don't think there is a problem.

Although sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates are highest in under 25 year olds, over 25s also have fairly high rates. We are also seeing a new phenomenon – an increase in STIs in over 50s who are starting new relationships, perhaps post-divorce.

The fact is, though, that anyone who has ever had unprotected (i.e. without a condom) sex is at risk of a sexually transmitted infection (STI) even if they feel completely well.

Infections such as chlamydia often cause no symptoms at all in women but can be the cause of infertility, ectopic pregnancy and pelvic pain.

Not all infections are transmitted sexually, and many women will have experienced things like thrush and bacterial vaginosis, which are a nuisance but will not infect sexual partners.

If you are diagnosed with an STI, though, it is really important for your partner/s to be treated before you start having sex again; otherwise you both end up passing the infection back and forth between you.

It is also really important to have a cervical smear test at least every 3 years to prevent cancer of the cervix. Cervical cancer is usually caused by a sexually transmitted virus called HPV which may cause changes in the cells of the cervix. Regular smear tests identify these changes and allow the cells to be treated before they become cancerous.

When should I have a sexual health check up?

Having a sexual health check up at the end of a relationship, or before a new one starts, gives you a chance to make sure that all is well before you embark on a new phase of your life. Obviously if you have any symptoms (e.g. an abnormal discharge, pain, abnormal bleeding), or if you are concerned that a partner might have an infection, you should have a check up straight away.

What does a sexual health check up involve?

If you have no symptoms (i.e. you feel completely well), a basic check up involves a swab test for chlamydia and gonorrhoea that you may take yourself if you wish, as well as blood tests for HIV and syphilis.

More comprehensive tests may include swab tests for thrush and other vaginal infections, as well as blood tests for herpes, or hepatitis B and C infections.

You can also have a smear as part of a sexual health check.

If you have symptoms, you would normally be examined by a doctor or nurse who would take various tests to identify what the problem is, and offer you the appropriate treatment.

Can STIs be treated?

The majority of STIs can be treated, and even STIs for which there is no cure yet (like HIV) can be controlled so well that people can expect to remain well and live a normal life.

If you would like a check up or just want to have a chat about things that concern you, we would be happy to help.

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