

Fact Sheet

Taking care of your sexual health



If you are sexually active it is important to regularly visit a health worker for sexual health checks, and to discuss any sexual health questions you may have.

What is a sexual health check?

A sexual health check is a check-up by a health worker for sexual health issues, like sexually transmissible infections (STIs). It also gives you a chance to ask questions about any other sexual health issues you may have, eg. contraception.

Where to go for a sexual health check

It depends on where you live and what services are close to you. A sexual health check is carried out by a health worker - your local GP, a doctor or nurse at a Sexual Health Centre, a Youth Health Centre, or a Family Planning Clinic. Check out where services are in your area or see the 'For more information' section at the end of this factsheet.

Who needs a sexual health check?

Anyone who is sexually active is advised to talk to a health worker about having a check-up. How often, and when you need to have a check-up, depends on your lifestyle and sexual activity. A sexual health check is advisable if any of the following points apply to you:

- you think that you might have an STI
- you have had unsafe sex, including vaginal, oral and/or anal sex
- you have had a condom break or fall off during sex
- your partner has another sexual partner
- you have more than one sexual partner
- you have shared needles for drugs, tattooing or piercing
- you are starting a new sexual relationship

What happens at a sexual health check?

A health worker will usually begin by taking a sexual history. Some of the questions they will ask may seem quite personal, for example:

- How many sexual partners have you had?
- What sexual activities have you engaged in?

- Do you have sex with males, females or both?
- Do you have any symptoms which could suggest an STI?
- Have you injected drugs and/or shared injecting equipment?
- Do you have any tattoos or body piercings?
- Have you been vaccinated, for example, with the hepatitis B and HPV vaccine?

You might feel uncomfortable when answering these questions, but it is important you give true answers so that you get the best advice and be given the right tests to keep you healthy.

Some STIs can lead to long term health problems if not treated properly. All the information you give the health worker is confidential and kept private. The health worker may mention 'contact tracing'. 'Contact tracing' is the process of identifying partners with whom a person has had recent sexual contact, in order to make sure that everyone who has potentially been exposed to an infection gets tested and the correct treatment. The health worker will discuss the best way to do this depending on each situation. There are useful websites to help with this (see resources at the end of this factsheet). A sexual health check may not always include an examination. Often a urine test is all that is needed. A range of tests may be done including:

- a urine sample and/or blood test
- a swab. Sometimes it may be necessary to take swabs from the throat, or rectum (inside the anus)
- for females, a vaginal check may also be done, eg. a Pap test (which takes a sample of cells from the cervix, which is inside the vagina). A Pap test is a common test that all sexually active women are advised to have every two years to help prevent cancer of the cervix (see our fact sheet on Pap tests). The Pap test doesn't check for infection but swabs may be taken at the same time that do check for infection.

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Asking questions

A visit to a sexual health worker is a great opportunity to ask any questions you have about your sexual health or to discuss anything that has been worrying you. A good health worker will encourage you to ask questions. It's important that you feel like you are able to ask any questions you have. It is equally important that the health worker answers your questions and explains everything in a way that you are able to understand.

What other questions could you ask?

Some questions you may wish to ask the health worker before you have a sexual health check include:

- Is there a cost for a sexual health check?
- Does this service bulk bill?
- Will it assist a young person in finding out their Medicare number?
- Does your service provide STI testing and contraception?
- What is the service's view on seeing young people without their parents?
- Will written information be given regarding the infections being tested for and contraception provided?
- Does this service have emergency appointments that can be used for pregnancy testing or emergency contraception?

Some of the questions you might like to ask during the check-up include:

- What exactly are the tests for?
- Will the test be a blood test or urine test? Many people mistakenly think a blood test will cover everything. If any of the tests are positive, do I have to tell anyone? Will the health worker tell anyone? What is the treatment?
- If any of the tests are positive, will that affect my future fertility, pregnancy or general health?
- Will I need to have another test later?

Feeling comfortable

Stay in tune with how you are feeling - if you are feeling uncomfortable with the health worker, or you feel that the person you are consulting is uncomfortable, you might like to ask to see someone else or try another service.

Acknowledgements

The information provided here has been adapted from content taken from the Queensland Government Sexual Health website for young people - www.istaysafe.com.

For more Information

- Contact the Family Planning NSW Talkline on 1300 658 886 or go to www.fpnsw.org.au/talkline
- NRS (for deaf) 133 677
- NSW STI Programs Unit: excellent resources and information for healthcare practitioners – www.stipu.nsw.gov.au
- Sexual Health Services: To view a full listing of NSW Sexual Health Services, call the NSW Sexual Health Information Line on 1800 451 624, or visit www.health.nsw.gov.au/publichealth/sexualhealth/sexual_phus.asp
- NSW Health Multicultural Communications: for STI information in a number of languages www.mhcs.health.nsw.gov.au
- Let Them Know website: <http://www.letthemknow.org.au/>

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