



This factsheet is from a three part series for LGBTQ people, looking at laws that affect you, your rights and what to do if arrested, and information on sexual health, in Egypt, Iran, and Lebanon.

ARTICLE 19

SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

📍 IRAN



February 2018

YOUR SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL HEALTH



Sexuality is an important part of our lives. It connects us with others through sex, companionship and even love.

Sex can be fun and pleasurable, even more so if we protect our sexual health. This requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality where sexual relationships can be enjoyed safely, free from coercion, discrimination, and violence.

One of the more obvious aspects of being sexually healthy is preventing illnesses caused by infections we might exchange while having sex.

Here are a few simple steps to help you and your sexual partner(s) mitigate health risks related to sex and consider ways to stay safe.

Unfortunately, it can be difficult to access information about sexual health issues in Iran but there are support groups in place to help you find the information you may need.

SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

As you know, when you have intimate contact with another person (like when you have a French kiss, or have oral, vaginal, or anal sex with your partner), you exchange body fluids.

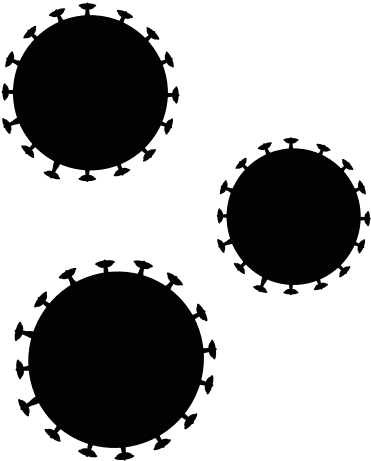
These body fluids can also contain bacteria and viruses that can cause infections that make you sick. Sometimes they go unnoticed, because there are no symptoms, but if left untreated they can have serious consequences.

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are thus the transfer of an infection from a bacteria or virus from one person to another person through sexual acts.

SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

Anyone can get an STI through sexual contact (oral, vaginal, or anal) with another person. Gay or straight, transgender or cisgender, man or woman: it doesn't make a difference. STIs don't discriminate.

Here are some of the more common types of infections that can be transmitted through sexual contact.



▶ **HIV/AIDS:** HIV is the acronym for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV attacks your body's white blood cells, making it difficult for your immune system to fight infections. Without a strong immune system, your body won't be able to defend itself against infections.

You may have heard about AIDS. AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is the final stage of HIV infection, but not all those infected with HIV virus develop AIDS.

The early signs of an HIV-infection can include swollen glands and flu-like symptoms lasting from two to four weeks. In most cases, the more serious symptoms of HIV may not appear until months or years later. A simple blood test can determine if someone has HIV or not.

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There is no cure for HIV. In the early days of the HIV epidemic, diagnosis was for many a death sentence. With no medication to keep the virus under control almost all people living with HIV developed AIDS. Thanks to advances in medicine, today there are many treatments available which prevent AIDS by helping the body to control HIV and – if treated successfully – eliminate the risk of transmitting it to others. See 'More information on sexual health in Persian' section below for more information.

▶ **Syphilis:** Syphilis is a bacteria that can be transmitted from one person to another through sex. The syphilis bacteria infect the genital area, lips, mouth, or anus. If detected early, it can be easily treated by antibiotics. Symptoms of syphilis include small, painless sores on your skin and some swelling around lymph nodes. These skin sores, which can come and go if syphilis is left untreated, increase the chances for HIV to transfer from one person to another. Many people with Syphilis may be unaware that they carry the infection.

SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET



- ▶ **Genital herpes:** This virus is called HSV, or herpes simplex virus. It can be transmitted through vaginal, anal, or oral sex with a person who carries it. Many people who have herpes may not realise as there are no – or only very mild – symptoms. Some people may have had herpes for years without knowing it.

When infected, the virus can cause sores and blisters on genitals, anus, thighs, or oral cavity. These blisters can break, become painful, and then heal. People who have genital herpes can pass it on to their sexual partners even when there are no sores on the body.

Genital herpes has no cure, but you can take medication to control the symptoms, and lower the risk of passing it on to others. A medical professional in Iran can administer a test to determine if you or your partner has genital herpes.

- ▶ **Gonorrhea:** Gonorrhea is an infection caused by bacteria and can be transmitted from one person to another through anal, oral, or vaginal sex.

Gonorrhea does not always have symptoms. Men with gonorrhea may have pain urinating, and women may experience bleeding between their periods, pain urinating, and increase in vaginal discharge. Both men and women suffer from a yellowish green discharge. If left untreated, gonorrhea can cause problems with the prostate and testicles in men and problems with pregnancy and infertility in women.

Gonorrhea is detectable by a lab test, and can be treated with antibiotics.

- ▶ **HPV:** HPV, or human papilloma viruses, are common viruses that can cause skin growth or warts. There are many subtypes of the virus. Though most HPVs are harmless, some can cause cancer. If you have unprotected sex with someone who has HPV, they can pass the genital virus to you. If infected, you may get genital warts. More dangerous forms of HPV can cause anus or penis cancer in men or cervix, vulva, vagina, or anus cancer in women.

Some people may have HPV without knowing it, since they develop no symptoms. A medical professional can test you for HPV, and if detected, treat the virus.

SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

There are vaccines that can be used from an early age to protect against serious forms of HPV. Unfortunately, these vaccines are not available in many countries, however, you can access certain forms of this vaccine (Gardasil) in Iran. You can ask a trusted General Practitioner for more information on these vaccines.

➤ **Chlamydia:** Chlamydia is caused by bacteria called chlamydia trachomatis, which can pass from one person to another through unprotected oral, vaginal, or anal sex. Women can get chlamydia in the cervix, rectum, or throat. Men can get chlamydia inside their anus, rectum, or throat. It is one of the most common STIs.

Since chlamydia doesn't usually have any symptoms, many people with it may be unaware of their infection, and unintentionally pass it on to their sexual partners. It may take several weeks before the person who got the infection from their partner shows any symptoms. The symptoms in women can include abnormal vaginal discharge and vaginal pain while urinating or having intercourse. Men can also experience a burning sensation in their penis, especially while urinating, and sometimes pain and swelling in testicles. If the chlamydia infects the rectum, it can cause rectal pain, bleeding, or discharge.

A urine test (or a cotton swab from the vagina) can diagnose chlamydia. If diagnosed with the bacteria, you can treat it with antibiotics, although antibiotics cannot repair any permanent damage the disease has caused. Since it is common to get a repeat infection, if you are diagnosed with chlamydia you should get tested again three months after treatment.

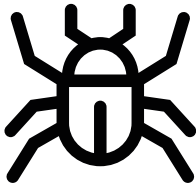
➤ **Hepatitis C:** Hepatitis C is a viral infection with hepatitis C virus (HCV) causing the inflammation of the liver. Initial infection with the virus is symptomless in 75% of all cases. Infection remains silent and can take many years before symptoms like fatigue, weakness, spider like blood vessels and bleeding from the esophagus, which increases as the liver becomes more scarred or fibrosis (cirrhosis is the advanced stage). Increased alcohol consumption and concurrent HIV infection can speed up the onset of cirrhosis.

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SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

Sexual transmission is uncommon, yet it is still a risk from practicing unsafe sex or when other STIs are present.

HCV is diagnosed through blood tests for HCV antibodies in the blood. There are oral treatments present for most cases.



➤ **Pubic lice:** also commonly known as “crabs” are small insects that live solely on humans by attaching themselves to coarse hair. Normally present in pubic hair they can also be found in armpit hair or eye lashes. Public lice are smaller than head lice and have rounder bodies. Infections occur through close – usually sexual – contact. Symptoms start with itching in the pubic area but the lice are visible to the naked eye. They are transmitted even via safe sex as they are present on body hair. They can be self-treated with topical agents.

Anyone having sex (even once) can contract a STI. Mostly infections occur through unprotected sexual contact, but they can also happen when using condoms and lube.

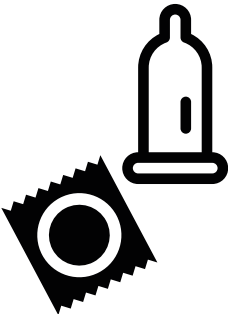
Condoms can greatly reduce the risk of transmitting STIs, but do not fully eliminate them. Condoms are widely available to buy in Iran.

WHAT CAN YOU DO TO PROTECT YOURSELF?

Now that you better understand the risk of unprotected sex, and how it can impact us and our sexual partners, let’s talk about how we can avoid catching an STI.

Here are a few practical and simple steps to protect yourself against STIs:

➤ **Use protection and encourage your partner to do the same:** Use condoms with lots of water-based lubrication every time you have penetrative sex. Make sure you and your partner know how to use a condom correctly. It is important to use condoms that are manufactured in accordance with industry standards. Don’t recycle condoms, use each once only. Do not use a condom if the individual package is already open, or if it of questionable quality. Sub-standard condoms can have a high failure rate, and won’t protect you against STIs. In some cases they can also cause skin problems if you have an allergic reaction. Do not leave condoms in direct sunlight and do not use any that show signs of damage to the wrapping, discoloration, or loss of



SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

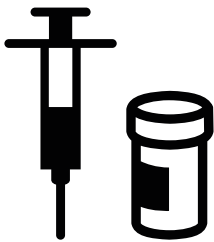
elasticity. Condoms will lower the risk of infection for all STIs, but they won't totally protect against certain STIs, like herpes or HPV.



▶ **Ask your sexual partner(s) about their sexual history:** Talk with your sex partner(s) about STIs before having sex with them. Ask them if they have (had) any sexually transmitted infections, or if they have recently been tested. Also let them know if you have or have had any STIs.



▶ **Get tested for STIs regularly:** Many people have different forms of STIs without knowing about it, because there are no – or only mild – symptoms. Even when you practice safe sex, it is still possible to catch some STIs from your sexual partner. The best way (by far) to protect yourself against STIs, especially if you have multiple sexual partners, is to get tested regularly. Twice a year is recommended for sexually active people.



▶ **If you have STIs, seek treatment:** This may sound obvious, but many people do not realise that they have contracted an STI. If a person finds an abnormal secretion from their genitalia, sores, pimples, or swelling in the pubic area, they might also feel too uncomfortable or scared to seek medical help for their STIs. They simply try to hide their infection from others, including their sexual partners, or they try to self-medicate with improper treatments. Some STIs can cause serious or permanent damage in the longer term, so it's really better to seek immediate medical help.

It might be scary or difficult to visit a dermatologist or venereologist in Iran. However, it is important to seek medical help to prevent your condition from worsening and leading to permanent health issues. Being sexually active is frowned upon in Iran and in some cases visiting a clinic can involve being mistreated or scolded by the treating doctor. However, STIs affect both heterosexual and homosexual people and a doctor can't know your sexual orientation or gender identity from a STI. No one going to a doctor would be arrested or charged with a crime, nor can they report you to the police. It is still advised to ask friends for recommendations to professional doctors that you can visit.

SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

TALKING ABOUT SEXUAL INFECTIONS



Unfortunately we live in a society where people don't really talk about sex. It is a taboo and regarded as a highly personal topic.

But with good sex comes a shared responsibility to keep you and your partner(s) healthy and safe.

Using protection and asking your partner to do the same only takes a few seconds. Remember: these few seconds of conversation about you and your partner's sexual health and using protection can save a lot of problems for both of you.

When should you seek medical examination?

We all need to learn about our bodies, examine our bodies and genitalia regularly so that we can recognise what is normal and what is not and know when we need to seek medical treatment.

For example, any kind of abnormal secretions, such as yellowish-green colored and/or foul smelling secretions from genitalia, sores, or growing pimples in the pubic region and/or abnormal itching or rashes mean that we should speak to a medical professional.

How can you find professional medical help?

Knowing about STIs is an important first step in preventing them. But sometimes you need professional medical help. Maybe you, your friends, or your sexual partner(s) have recently developed a new medical condition that you are not sure is sexually transmittable or not. Maybe you used to have unprotected sex and are now nervous to find out if you have a STI or maybe you just want to get tested to make sure you have nothing to worry about.

It is important that you see a medical professional who you can trust or has been referred to you. If you don't feel comfortable discussing your sex life and sexual-health-related questions with a medical professional you may not get the services you need, which could compromise your – and your partners' – sexual health.

You should always use medical services that you can trust, making sure they will protect your privacy and won't be judgmental about your sexual orientation or gender identity.

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SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

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Sadly, in Iran many medical experts do not (fully) understand or respect the queer community. Finding a reliable medical expert can be very hard. We have all experienced or heard about doctors that have humiliated us or our friends, didn't understand the difference between gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, or prescribed conversion therapy or dangerous psychoactive drugs to “cure” our queerness. It is important to avoid these doctors.

We cannot recommend health centres that offer professional and private medical services to the LGBTQ community members in Iran as many can be unsafe if you tell them about your sexual activities that may be deemed “illegal” under Iranian law. You should, therefore, consider avoiding telling a doctor anything about your sexual activities, unless the doctor is considered trustworthy.

Also, although confidentiality is an essential requirement for all healthcare staff, though this may differ across Iran, you are not obliged to tell the truth about your sexual behaviour, but do not hide critical information when it comes to diagnoses. If you need to inform your doctor about specifications of your sexual conduct, only consult a doctor who is trustworthy.

Depending on where you live, you may also know medical professionals who can help with your sexual health in a respectful, private, and professional manner. A good idea is always to ask a GP for more information. Depending on where you live, public hospitals, private clinics, or health centres may be of help. Fortunately, STIs have been a subject of concern for the Iranian authorities in recent years so discussion around these issues have increased.

Do not let the media or others' ignorance intimidate you. Remember you are in charge of your own sexual health and pleasure.

SEXUAL HEALTH FACTSHEET

INFORMATION ON SEXUAL HEALTH IN PERSIAN

If you need information about sexual health in Persian, see our list of free and reliable resources in Persian online:

- avishanx.com (comprehensive sex education for all)
- ctrlstd.com (normative STI informative website; They also have workshops in different cities in Iran)
- <http://aids.ir/Centers> (National Center for AIDS prevention)
- <http://hiv-sti.ir/> (National HIV and STI network)

Please note that you may find other sexual health advice on the internet. Some of this will be good and professional, and some will not (nor even safe). Always make sure to get medical advice from professional and reliable sources.

FINAL WORD

We hope you find this factsheet helpful and educational. If you feel the information has helped you better understand your sexual health, we encourage you to share with your friends and (sexual) partner(s). Share the love ... and the message – they will thank you for it!