

#BeMoreVital



A YOUTH GUIDE TO MANAGING SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED INFECTIONS

FOR YOUTH 15 - 29





TIP BOX



FEATURE BOX



ACTION BOX



PROMPT BOX



WHO WE ARE

bumb'INGOMSO – an isiXhosa phrase meaning “mould the future”
– is a multi-faceted HIV prevention project that supports
and empowers young people to fulfil their potential by
connecting them to key resources, support and networks.

WHY UNDERSTANDING STI'S MATTERS

Sexually transmitted infections (called STIs for short) are very common,
and anyone who is sexually active can get one. They can cause long-
term health problems for you and your partner if they aren't treated, but
many people don't even know they have one because there are often no
symptoms.

The good news is most STIs are treatable, and many are curable. Better
still, they can be prevented. This booklet will help you understand what
STIs are, how to protect yourself and what to do if you think you might
have one. There's no need to panic or feel ashamed. What matters is
getting checked by a doctor or nurse at a clinic and learning practical
ways to look after yourself.

MYTHS VS FACTS

When it comes to STIs, there's a lot of misinformation floating around. Let's clear some of it up.

Myth 1: You will know if you have an STI.

Fact: Many STIs **have no symptoms**, especially at first. You could, for example, have HIV and feel completely fine. Testing is the only way to know for sure.

Myth 2: You cannot get STIs from oral sex.

Fact: STIs can be passed through **oral, vaginal and anal sex**.

Myth 3: If a girl stands up after sex without a condom, she won't get an STI or fall pregnant.

Fact: Your body position after sex makes no difference. Once a virus or bacteria has entered the body during sex, standing up, jumping or urinating will not stop the infection. Nor will they stop pregnancy.

Myth 4: Having an STI means you're disgusting or a bad person.

Fact: STIs are a **health issue, not a moral problem**. It does not make you shameful if you get one.

Myth 5: You cannot enjoy sex with a condom.

Fact: Condoms don't have to take away pleasure. Using them correctly helps prevent STIs and unplanned pregnancies, so you can relax and focus on intimacy without the worry.

Myth 6: If you have the itch or pubic lice, you are bewitched.

Fact: Pubic lice and other genital infections are medical issues, not witchcraft.

Myth 7: Traditional medicine can cure STIs, including HIV.

Fact: All STIs need medical treatment to be cured, like antibiotics or antiretrovirals. Otherwise, they will spread and get worse.

Myth 8: Douching (washing the inside of the vagina with something like vinegar) prevents STIs like iGcushuwa (syphilis).

Fact: Douching does not prevent STIs and can even *increase* the risk by upsetting the natural balance in the vagina.

UNDERSTANDING STIS

STIs are infections that are passed from one person to another, mostly through sexual contact.

WHO CAN GET AN STI?

Anyone who is sexually active can get an STI, no matter their age, race, gender or sexual orientation as long as they don't use condoms. Even if you only have one partner, you can still get an STI if your partner has one.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE ONE?

One of the tricky things about STIs is that many of them don't have obvious symptoms, so the only way to know for sure is to get tested.

HOW DO STIS SPREAD?

STIs spread from having unprotected oral, anal or vaginal sex with someone who is infected. Some, like herpes and syphilis, can spread from skin to skin through touching or kissing if a person has sores in their genitals or mouth. Sharing needles or being exposed to infected blood can also spread STIs, such as HIV and Hepatitis B.



WHY SHOULD I GET TESTED?

Like most things, the longer you wait the worse it gets. When you have an STI, your body is also more likely to get other infections and STIs, like HIV. All STIs can be treated or cured, and the faster you start treatment the better.

WHAT HAPPENS IF STIS ARE NOT TREATED?

If you don't treat an STI, it won't just go away like a cold. It can get worse and damage your organs, cause ongoing pain, and harm your baby if you are pregnant.

Who can I talk to?

It can be awkward to talk about sex with your family or friends. So you can call or WhatsApp some of the numbers below for help and advice from people who are qualified to assist you.

#Keready WhatsApp 060 019 0000 to chat with a young doctor



Bumb'INGOMSO Call Centre

0800 55 55 58 (8am–4pm),

WhatsApp: 072 654 9224

SMS: 30487 for a call back

loveLife Call 0800 121 900 or send a PLZ CAL ME to 083 323 1023.



COMMON STIS: QUICK FACTS

Sexually transmitted infections can be caused by viruses, bacteria or parasites. Here are the most common ones you should know about and how they can affect your health.

HIV (HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS)

How it spreads: Unprotected sex, sharing drug-injecting needles, from mother to child during birth or breastfeeding.

Symptoms: There are often none at first; later it can include flu-like symptoms, weight loss or fatigue.

Treatment: Consistent anti-retroviral therapy (ART) keeps people healthy and prevents transmission.

Long-term effects: Without treatment, HIV can progress to AIDS and weaken the immune system.

CHLAMYDIA

How it spreads: Vaginal, anal or oral sex with an infected person.

Symptoms: There are often no symptoms, but they may include a discharge, burning feeling when urinating or pain in the testicles or abdomen.

Treatment: It is curable with antibiotics.

Long-term effects: It can cause pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility if left untreated.

GONORRHOEA

How it spreads: Vaginal, anal and oral sex with an infected person.

Symptoms: Burning or pain during urination is common, and a white, green or yellow discharge, but sometimes there are no symptoms.

Treatment: It is curable with antibiotics (although some strains are resistant to normal antibiotics and harder to treat).

Long-term effects: It can cause infertility and chronic pain if untreated.

SYPHILIS (IGCUSHUWA)

How it spreads: Vaginal, anal and oral sex.

Symptoms: Painless sore at the infection site, followed later by a non-itchy rash on hands and feet, a fever or fatigue.

Treatment: It is curable with antibiotics.

Long-term effects: Can cause heart and brain diseases, and affect other organs if untreated.

HPV (HUMAN PAPILLOMAVIRUS)

How it spreads: Skin-to-skin sexual contact.

Symptoms: There are often none, but it can cause genital warts or cervical changes.

Treatment: Warts can be treated. There are HPV vaccines to prevent many strains.

Long-term effects: Certain types can cause cervical or other cancers in the genitals or mouth.

HERPES

How it spreads: Skin-to-skin contact, including oral or genital areas.

Symptoms: Painful blisters or sores, which can disappear and come back again.

Treatment: There is no cure, but antiviral medication manages outbreaks.

Long-term effects: Recurrent outbreaks, stigma, psychological stress.

HEPATITIS B & C

How it spreads: Through sexual contact, sharing drug-injecting needles, from mother to child during birth.

Symptoms: There are often no symptoms, but they can include yellowish skin, dark urine, feeling very tired, nausea, vomiting and abdominal pain.

Treatment: Hepatitis B is preventable with a vaccine; Hepatitis C can be treated with medication.

Long-term effects: Liver failure, cirrhosis and liver cancer if untreated.

TRICHOMONIASIS (TRICH)

How it spreads: Vaginal sex.

Symptoms: Itching, discharge, pain when urinating or having sex; sometimes no symptoms.

Treatment: It is curable with antibiotics.

Long-term effects: Can increase HIV risk and cause low birth weight in babies of infected mothers.

What symptoms should you watch for?

- Unusual discharge from your penis or vagina
- Pain or a burning feeling when urinating
- Sores, blisters, bumps or rashes around your genitals, anus or mouth
- Itching, redness or swelling in genital areas
- Pain during sex
- Lower abdominal pain (in women)
- Warts on your genitals

Some STIs, like HIV, chlamydia, gonorrhoea or HPV, don't always show clear signs at first. You might feel fine but still be passing an infection to your partner without knowing it.



GETTING TESTED

STIGMA AND FEAR

Going to a clinic for STI testing or HIV treatment can feel daunting. You might worry about being judged or be embarrassed about your symptoms. But remember, you have the right to respectful health care.



Regular testing is part of staying healthy and responsible, just like brushing your teeth or getting vaccinations.

WHEN TO GET TESTED

- If you've had unprotected sex.
- If you notice any of the signs and symptoms.
- Before starting a new sexual relationship.
- If your partner has tested positive for an STI.

WHERE TO GO

Visit a youth-friendly local clinic, community health centre or mobile testing unit in your area. You have the responsibility to be honest to your health care provider, take your treatment and inform your sexual partner/s. It's normal to feel nervous, but don't let that stop you from asking questions. Remember the staff can only help you if you tell them your problem.



Visit www.bwisehealth.com/ClinicFinder to find a clinic near you. You can also WhatsApp your questions to LoveLife: 060 017 9672 or call bumb'INGOMSO Call Centre at 0800 555 558

WHAT HAPPENS DURING A TEST

You will have one of these simple tests depending on the STI:

- Blood tests (for HIV, syphilis, hepatitis)
- Urine tests (for chlamydia and gonorrhoea)
- Swabs from the genital area, mouth, or anus (for chlamydia, gonorrhoea, herpes, HPV)

The results are usually ready within days.

YOUR RIGHTS

Your tests are confidential. No clinic can share your results without your permission. You also have the right to ask questions and have your privacy respected.



WHAT TO DO IF YOU HAVE AN STI

1. DON'T PANIC

Most STIs can be **treated or cured** effectively with medicine. If you treat them early, it helps prevent **long-term health problems**.

2. FOLLOW YOUR TREATMENT PLAN

Make sure you **take all the pills you are given**, even if your symptoms go away, otherwise you will not be cured. It's important that you don't have sex until your treatment is complete or the clinic says it's safe. If your STI doesn't improve with treatment, go back to the clinic. You may need to have more tests to change your treatment.



3. TALK TO YOUR PARTNER

You must tell your current or recent sexual partner about your STI so they can also get treatment. If you don't, you will just end up passing it back and forth between you, or infect other people. Even if one partner feels fine, both should get tested as the symptoms might just be delayed.



If you don't tell your sexual partner that you are HIV-positive you can face charges of attempted murder in South Africa. Being honest protects you legally as well



How pregnant women can protect their babies from infections

All pregnant women who go to antenatal clinics should be tested for syphilis and HIV. If a test shows an infection, treatment is given to prevent passing it on to the baby. It's important to have these tests early in pregnancy, ideally within the first three months, so that treatment can start as soon as possible.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

Protecting yourself from STIs is about **making smart choices**.

1. DON'T HAVE SEX

The safest way to prevent STIs is not having sex.

2. USE A CONDOM

- Wear a condom each and every time you have sex – even with your 560.
- Male and female condoms are available for free at all government health facilities, or you can buy them at the grocery store or garage anytime – no excuses!
- Condoms protect against vaginal and anal sex; dental dams protect during oral sex.

3. BE FAITHFUL TO ONE PARTNER

Having fewer partners lowers your risk of STIs.

4. TALK WITH YOUR PARTNER

Talk openly about your sexual history agree on boundaries and safer sex practices together.

5. GET TESTED REGULARLY

You and your partner should get tested before starting a new sexual relationship.

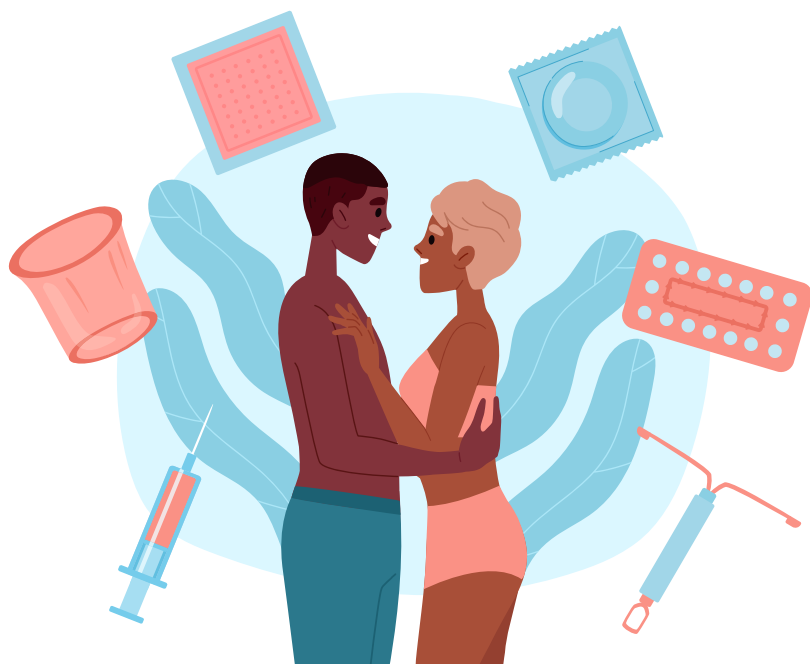
6. AVOID ALCOHOL AND DRUGS

Being high or drunk makes it hard to make good judgements or stick to safe sex practices.

7. GET VACCINATED

HPV vaccines protect you against certain strains that cause cervical and other cancers.

Hepatitis B vaccines protect your liver from infection.



Even if you're in a loving relationship, using condoms and getting tested **protects both of you.**

Common condom mistakes

Condoms work very well if you use them correctly, so make sure you follow the instructions. Don't make these mistakes:

- Putting them on upside down, inside out, or not rolled down all the way. Leaving air bubbles in the tip of male condoms can also make them break.
- Using an expired or damaged one: Always check the date and packaging for tears.
- Wrong lube: Oil (like Vaseline, baby oil) can break condoms. Use water-based lube or silicone-based lube.
- Double-bagging: Never use two condoms at once. When they rub against each other, they can break.
- Too late: Only putting it on right before ejaculation is too late. Put it on at the start of sex.
- Never reuse a condom.

After you've finished, always wrap them up and throw them in a bin (not down the toilet as it blocks drains).



HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS AND STI PREVENTION

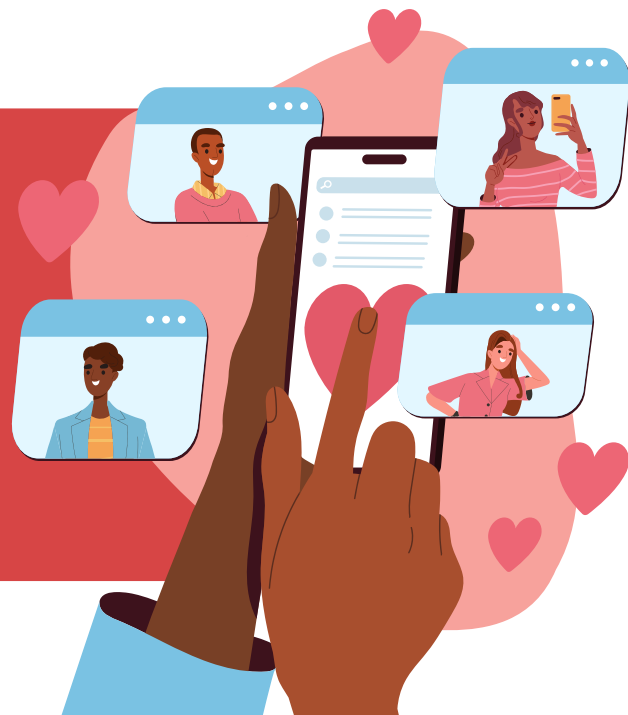
Preventing STIs isn't just about medicine or protection – it's also about the kind of relationship you're in. If someone pressures you, ignores your boundaries or makes choices about sex for you, it's hard to stay safe. That's why healthy relationships with consent and respect are important for sexual health.

UNDERSTANDING CONSENT

Everyone has the right to decide if they want to have sex, when, where, how and with who. If you both agree freely to have sex, that is consent. There is no consent if you do it because you're afraid or are forced. Silence or being under the influence of alcohol or drugs does not count as consent. Nor does giving someone a gift or buying them a drink mean they have agreed to sex.

Consent can also be withdrawn. Anyone can change their mind at any time. Even if you start having sex and one person wants to stop, you must stop.

Hookup culture online

An illustration of a hand holding a smartphone. The screen shows a social media interface with several profile pictures of diverse people. There are several pink hearts floating around the phone. A red speech bubble with a white checkmark icon is positioned to the left of the text.

Social media makes it look like risky sexual relationships are normal. Hookup culture and dating apps often promote having many one-night stands and not using condoms. Watch out! This is very dangerous behaviour

UNHEALTHY OR ABUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Staying in an unhealthy or abusive relationship puts you at higher risk for contracting STIs because they often involve **control, fear or violence**. Red flags include feeling anxious or unsafe, being cut off from friends or family, threats, manipulation or being pressured into sex. Reach out to a professional counsellor for help and advice if you are experiencing these things.

Get help for free

GBV Command Centre (Confidential advice and referral to shelters or social workers): 0800 428 428 | Please call me: *120*7867# |
For the deaf: SMS 'help' to 31531



TEARS Foundation (GBV support, counselling and referrals):
08000 TEARS / 08000 83277 | Please call me: *134*7355#

Masimanyane Gender-based violence Intervention:
WhatsApp: 066 306 2407

Masithethe Counselling services: 043 722 2000

Bumb'INGOMSO Call Centre: 0800 555 558



FOCUS ON HIV

HIV is the most serious STI in South Africa, and yet it is also one of the most misunderstood.

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV stands for **human immunodeficiency virus**. It attacks your immune system – the part of your body that fights off sickness. HIV enters special white blood cells called **CD4 cells** and uses them to multiply. Over time, if HIV is not treated, it destroys these cells. This weakens your immune system and makes it harder to fight off infections.

WHAT IS AIDS?

Without treatment, HIV can progress to **AIDS** (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). This happens when HIV has badly damaged the immune system. A person with AIDS has very few CD4 cells and becomes vulnerable to infections like TB or pneumonia, which can kill them. These are called *opportunistic infections* because they take advantage of a weak immune system.

HOW IS HIV SPREAD?

HIV is only passed on through **certain body fluids**: blood, semen, vaginal fluid, rectal fluid and breast milk. For HIV to be transmitted, three things must happen:

1. One person must have HIV.
2. The body fluid must contain enough of the virus.
3. The fluid must enter the other person's bloodstream – for example through:
 - Sex without a condom (the skin of the penis, vagina and anus is thin and has tiny openings).
 - Sharing needles with infected blood.
 - Birth or breastfeeding, from mother to baby.
 - Blood contact through open wounds, or rarely, a contaminated blood transfusion.

HIV **can't** be spread through saliva, sweat, vomit, urine or faeces.



You can't get HIV from hugging, kissing or sharing food.

SYMPTOMS OF HIV

Many people with HIV feel healthy and have **no symptoms**. Some feel like they have flu a few days after infection – fever, tiredness, swollen glands, sore throat, muscle aches, diarrhoea and rashes. This can be confused with other illnesses so the only way to know for sure is through an **HIV test**.

IS THERE A CURE FOR HIV?

There is no cure, but there is **treatment**. Antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) can stop HIV from multiplying. If you get HIV you need to take these drugs every day to keep your immune system strong. The good news is that this treatment means people can live long, healthy lives and never develop AIDS. Even when they feel better, though, they must keep taking ARVs for the rest of their life.



HIV MYTHS

Just like other STIs, people still believe harmful myths about how HIV is spread, who gets it or what it means for your future. Here are some common myths.

Myth 1: You should avoid people with HIV.

Fact: HIV is not spread like the flu. You can't get it through casual contact like hugging, kissing or shaking hands. It only passes through certain body fluids entering the bloodstream: blood, semen, vaginal fluid, rectal fluid or breast milk.

Myth 2: Herbs or traditional remedies can protect you from HIV.

Fact: No herbs or natural remedies can prevent or cure HIV. Inserting plants or herbs into the vagina can increase risk by causing dryness or tearing the sensitive tissue, which makes it easier to get infected.



Myth 3: Having sex with a virgin or toddler can cure HIV.

Fact: This is completely false and very harmful. Having sex with a virgin only puts another person at risk of infection.

Myth 4: Taking a shower after sex will wash away HIV.

Fact: HIV cannot be washed off with water or soap. Once HIV enters the body it is in your blood.

Myth 5: Using protection in sex means you don't trust your partner.

Fact: Many people don't know their status, so using protection and testing for HIV protects both you and your partner.

Myth 6: Young women are more at risk because they "sleep around".

Fact: Young women are more vulnerable because HIV can pass more easily through the thin vaginal wall, not because of behaviour.

Myth 7: Having sex during your period reduces the risk of HIV.

Fact: Menstrual blood can carry HIV, so sex during periods increases the risk.

Myth 8: HIV is a punishment from God or the ancestors.

Fact: HIV is a virus that anyone can get if exposed. Blaming God or the ancestors adds shame and stigma, which stops people from getting tested or treated.

Myth 9: Only gay people and sex workers get HIV.

Fact: Anyone can get HIV. It's about exposure, not identity.

Myth 10: HIV-positive women should never breastfeed.

Fact: Exclusive breastfeeding is safe and good for the baby if the mother is on ARVs and the baby is given nevirapine.



When Bongani first learned that his new partner was HIV-positive, he had a lot of questions. "I was scared at first," he admits. "But then I learned something that changed everything: if someone with HIV is on effective treatment and their viral load is undetectable, they can't transmit the virus to others. It's called U=U: Undetectable equals Untransmittable."



PROTECTING YOURSELF FROM HIV

Along with condoms, there is another powerful option you can use to protect yourself from getting HIV. It's called PrEP.

WHAT IS PREP?

PrEP stands for Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis. It's a daily pill that an HIV-negative person can take to prevent themselves getting infected with HIV. It's especially important if you are at high risk from engaging in unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners, not using a condom consistently, or not knowing your partner's HIV status.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

PrEP creates a shield around your blood cells to protect them from HIV. Because HIV can't infect these blood cells, the virus dies.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS IT?

If you take it every day, it reduces the risk of getting HIV from sex by as much as 99%. But PrEP isn't instant and needs to be used for 7 - 21 days to reach the best protection.

WHAT DO I HAVE TO DO TO GET IT?

Truvada is the most common medication for PrEP and you can only get it with a prescription. You need to visit a local clinic and take an HIV test to make sure you're HIV negative before starting it. After that, you must visit your clinic every three months for follow-ups, HIV tests and refills.

IS PREP RIGHT FOR ME?

That's your decision. It's your body, so it's your choice! You might consider PrEP if you're having sex and you want an additional method to protect yourself from HIV. PrEP only needs to be taken at times in your life when you are vulnerable to HIV.

DOES PREP PROTECT ME FROM OTHER STIS OR PREGNANCY?

No, PrEP will not prevent other STIs or pregnancy. You need to use condoms and contraception with oral PrEP.



Emergency pills for HIV prevention

If there's an emergency – like a condom breaking, accidental blood contact, or if you've been raped – you can take **PEP** (post-exposure prophylaxis). It's a pill you start within **72 hours** to help stop HIV. You need to take it every day for 28 days, and you can only get it from a clinic or health centre. It works really well, but you need to act fast. It's not the same as PrEP, so don't get confused!



PrEP vs PEP

Don't get confused!

PrEP (Pre = before) is a daily pill you take for weeks before sex to prevent HIV.

PEP (Post = after) is an emergency pill you take immediately after possible HIV exposure for 28 days.



The Department of Health provides PEP and PrEP to everyone for free at health facilities. Government clinics and community health centres also provide contraceptives for free, except for the hormone patch.

For more info go to your nearest clinic or visit www.bwisehealth.com

STAY SAFE, BE HEALTHY

STIs are common, but, as you've seen in this booklet, you have the power to protect yourself and your partner. Using protection, getting tested regularly and seeking treatment are simple steps that make a big difference. Remember, there's no shame in taking care of your sexual health — it's all about staying safe and building your future.





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