

You Choose to Know

Eliminating Stigma From STIs and Testing



You probably already know how important it is to talk to your students about sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and ways to prevent them, and the data helps make the case. For example, the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) reports that there are 20 million new cases of STIs occurring each year. Youth between the ages of 15-24 make up half of those cases. [In 2018, the Maryland Department of Health reported](#) 10,086 cases of chlamydia and 1,830 cases of gonorrhea for youth between the ages of 10-19 across the state. We all know that once a STI is diagnosed, the most important thing to do is get treatment, but feelings of shame can get in the way. [In May 2019, research done at Children's National Health System](#) revealed that fewer than 60% of young women who were diagnosed with an STI in the emergency room actually filled their prescription and are therefore at risk for a wide range of complications such as pain and infertility, as well as risk infecting partners.

It is important for us to help young people take the shame and stigma out of getting tested and treated for STIs.

Here is some key information to give young people about STIs:

STIs do not reflect someone's values, morals, or worth. They can infect people regardless of their race, gender, age, sexual experience, number of sexual partners, or religion.

Anyone can contract an STI no matter their sexual identities or orientation. It's important to focus on the ways that STIs are transmitted and the bodily fluids involved.

Even people in monogamous relationships can end up with an STI. The reality is that people can have an STI—some without symptoms—from a previous relationship and pass that along to their current partner, even if they only have one partner at a time.

STIs can only be diagnosed if you get tested. Some young people worry about being stigmatized if they get tested, let alone get a positive STI diagnosis ... and their peers can make it worse with their words and actions! Name-calling, "teasing" about the diagnosis, and shunning are all ways that friends can perpetuate the shame.

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Key information, cont.:

There are support groups for people living with a STI. Tell your students that if they or someone they care about is diagnosed with an STI, support groups exist to help people manage their emotions about having a STI.

It's better to not avoid the inevitable. STIs do not just go away on their own. It's better to deal with it head on than to wait it out because of embarrassment or guilt. Untreated STIs can cause further complications.

Health professionals can give accurate medical advice. Encourage students to avoid believing all that they read on social media threads or the internet about their diagnosis. A healthcare provider can accurately tell them about treatment plans, how not to transmit the infection, and how to protect themselves in the future.

STI testing is not painful. Young people may have an idea that getting tested is invasive and painful. However, explain to your students that testing typically only requires a urine test.

Most STIs are treatable. It's important to emphasize that many STIs are treatable. With proper treatment, most STIs are not life threatening and have very few long-term consequences.

STI testing is available for free! In Baltimore City, young people have a variety of places to go and get tested for free. Some of those options include school-based health centers, [the Baltimore City Health Department](#), [Planned Parenthood of Maryland](#), and [Chase Brexton Health Care](#).

Although ending the shame and stigma around STIs is crucial, it is also important to emphasize the importance of prevention.

Here are some messages you should share with students about prevention:

- » **Use condoms!** Emphasize over and over again the importance of using condoms to prevent STIs (and unintended pregnancies).
- » **Talk with a trusted adult.** Youth should feel comfortable asking any questions or talking about concerns they have around safer sex.
- » **Get tested!** Acknowledge that getting tested may not feel easy to do, but emphasize it is better to know their status so that they have peace of mind, can get treated if necessary, and reduce the chance of passing the STI to a partner.
- » **Talk to your partner(s).** Encourage students to ask their partners if they have been tested and about their views on using condoms. Inform students that they can get tested or get condoms with their partner—or even their friends—if that helps ease the fear.

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Resources

[U Choose](#), a project of the Baltimore City Health Department Refer students and parents to the U Choose website where they can find information on birth control methods, STIs and testing, relationships, and other resources.

[Yes Means Test™](#) This site provides a cool layout for students to learn about how testing works, why they should get tested, and how to talk about STIs with a healthcare provider.

[6 Strategies for Breaking the Stigma of Living With an STD](#) U.S. News & World Report published an article giving tips on eliminating the stigma and shame around living with an STI. These six tips can be shared with your students.

[How To Talk To Your Teen About STIs In A Helpful, Not Awkward Way](#) HuffPost has prepared an article of conversation starters to get teens talking about STIs. Although this article is aimed at parents, the information can be useful for all adults who work with youth.

[Say It With Research: 4 Ways to Deliver Effective STD Messaging for Youth](#) ETR has published a blog post with ways to deliver appropriate messaging around STIs to youth. Although short, the blog really touches on some effective communication strategies you can use in your classroom.

[STD Prevention Beyond Condoms](#) Check out this video by **[Amaze](#)** on how STIs are passed from person to person. This can be a great supplementary resource to share with your students.



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