

## **Coping with Sexually Transmitted Infections as a Result of Sexual Violence**

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*by Jackie and Kristy*

Being a victim of sexual violence leaves you vulnerable on many levels. In addition to the emotional ramifications a person faces after experiencing trauma, there are possible physical consequences that stem from unwanted sexual contact.

Often in the aftermath of sexual abuse or rape, many survivors are left with an incredibly frightening question... ***Did I contract a sexually transmitted infection?***

### **What is an STI?**

A sexually transmitted infection is defined as: an infection that can be transferred from one person to another through sexual contact. Sexually transmitted infections are most often spread by oral, vaginal or anal contact; however they can also be contracted after skin to skin contact.

There are a wide variety of sexually transmitted infections that can occur during the course of unprotected sexual contact. While it is not possible to go through an entire list, we have compiled a few helpful resources for anyone dealing with STIs.

[American Social Health Association](#) (STD/STI fact sheets, in PDF format)

[Your Total Health](#) (facts and health guide for common STIs)

[STD.Co.UK](#) (Information, resources and articles)

### **The Stigma of Having an STI**

Seeking medical attention can be difficult for many survivors. The trauma and shock of sexual violence often leaves us unable to acknowledge that there is a need to seek medical attention. Other times, fear or feelings of shame or embarrassment may prevent us from reaching out for medical assistance. While some people choose not to have an evidentiary examination following a sexual assault, it is important to ensure that your physical well-being is taken care of.

There is a cultural element of shame and secrecy surrounding sexually transmitted infections

and diseases. As a result, many people fear getting tested. It can be particularly intimidating for survivors of sexual violence, who may already be struggling with stigma or intense feelings of shame over what they have endured.

Survivors who are scared of being reproached by their doctor for contracting an STI might avoid visiting the doctor and wait for the symptoms to go away. Even if you do not have any physical symptoms of an STI, it is really crucial to be tested after experiencing a sexual assault. Some STIs do not display symptoms for a long time so it is impossible to know for sure if you are infected unless you are tested. All STIs are treatable and many are curable, but if left untreated, some can result in more serious or long-term medical problems.

What happened was not your fault; please don't let embarrassment be a health risk for you. Being tested can give you peace of mind, or enable you to take the necessary steps to ensure that you're as healthy as possible. As upsetting as it is to find out that you have contracted an STI following sexual assault, that knowledge allows you to take some control in taking care of your own health.

You may have some very real fears regarding STI testing. While it's an understandable reaction to feel embarrassed and intimidated by the situation, it is important to try and remind yourself that you have done nothing wrong. You deserve to have your health taken care of.

Some suggestions:

- Ask questions ahead of time. Call a health care provider to find out some information on STI testing procedures. Sometimes it can be reassuring when you know what to expect.
- Find a doctor whom you feel as comfortable as possible with.
- If you can, let the nurse or doctor know that you are a survivor. This can help them to be more supportive and sensitive to your needs.
- Take a trusted and supportive friend along. If you're not comfortable with them being in the room, it can still be comforting to have someone waiting outside.

Remember: Testing is confidential. Although this experience is difficult for you, it is something that doctors deal with on a daily basis. A good doctor is not going to cast judgment and should, in fact, provide you with support, compassion and additional resources to help you.

### **Finding Out You Have an STI**

Discovering that you have a sexually transmitted infection can be devastating because it brings a social overhead other viruses don't. The stigma associated with a diagnosis of an STI can have emotional effects, regardless of whether any symptoms are present. Finding out that you have

an STI may raise strong emotional issues, especially in the first few weeks or months after a diagnosis. Some people initially feel embarrassment, shame, anger, or depression.

### **Struggling to Accept**

In addition to dealing with the emotional ramifications of the actual STI, we are left to cope with the knowledge of how we got it. It can be overwhelming to learn that you have contracted an STI from sexual assault.

It's absolutely not your fault that you have contracted an STI. When speaking with medical professionals, they are often quick to site safe sex practices. There can be an element of shame in knowing that this was not an option for you. It can also be too overwhelming to tell your doctor how you contracted the STI so you may sit there in silence and feeling humiliated.

Many of us have felt shame for having "something wrong" with us. It's very difficult to live with the knowledge that there's something wrong with you because of something that someone else did. If the STI you contract is not curable, it can take some time to come to terms with the idea that it's not only something that you have to live with forever, but a permanent reminder of what you've been through.

Sexually transmitted illnesses are often connected to the genital area, which can compound feelings of stigma or shame, particularly after the trauma that survivors have already experienced to their bodies. In addition, the knowledge that you have contracted an STI can prompt anxiety or fear that other people will be able to tell that "something is wrong" with you.

Please know that you don't need to carry a stigma or suffer for life. As overwhelming as it is right now, STIs are manageable and it won't always be a prominent issue in your life.

### **Living With an STI**

Living with an STI can be traumatising in itself - on top of having to deal with outbreaks, and not feeling well, it can bring up reminders of your assault, as well as the fear of discrimination and rejection.

Often times the shame may feel so great that it hinders our desire to be honest with our sexual partners. It takes a lot of courage to be able to tell others about your STI, especially a new partner. While fear or anger may make it challenging for you to tell a partner, you might discover that STIs don't affect your intimate relationships as much as you originally feared.

This issue is very personal for the both of us.

***A personal perspective by Jackie:***

When I first began to get outbreaks on my mouth I was in complete denial. I just couldn't accept that I had an STI. Because they are visible they tend to be a very painful and shameful reminder of my rape. The outbreaks are more likely to occur during stressful periods, which is one reason they occurred so frequently after my rape. Having people make jokes about the sores on my mouth only made it worse.

Topical medicines were never strong enough to prevent an outbreak and taking medication for the rest of my life wasn't anything I was comfortable accepting. I was resistant to lose control over yet another aspect of my body. Eventually it became evident that it was necessary to take medication. It did a great deal to prevent outbreaks, allowing me the healing time I needed to find acceptance over the situation. After about three years I stopped taking medication on a daily basis and now combat the infection with a very strong (and expensive!) topical medication.

It isn't easy when I have an outbreak, but I now can see that it isn't happening because I did something wrong. I know to be gentle with myself and reach out for the support that I need.

***A personal perspective by Kristy:***

When I found out that I had contracted an STI from my rape I was completely mortified. I heard the words 'no cure' and thought my life was never going to be the same. It made me feel a little bit sick to think that I had something in 'common' with a rapist, and I felt dirty and ashamed. I was also very angry – as if being raped hadn't been intrusive enough, I now had to deal with permanent consequences that were no fault of my own.

One of the most difficult things for me was telling my boyfriend at the time. It was an uncomfortable conversation and I was sure that he would be disgusted with me. It would have been easy to keep my shame to myself, but I was never given the opportunity to decide if I wanted to put my body at risk, and I felt better knowing that I had done the right thing. Making a conscious decision to practise safe sex helped me to separate myself from the person who gave me this illness.

It's very difficult to come to terms with having an STI from rape, and I held all of those feelings inside for a long time. Sometimes it still feels like I've been permanently tainted, but there are steps that I was able to take to minimise the effects it has on my day-to-day life. It's not

something I share with people I meet on the street, but I no longer feel quite as ashamed about it. The people who care about us are going to be understanding and supportive.

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