

[Health](#)

How Soon After Sex Can STD Symptoms Start?

The answer is more complicated than you think

BY [MARKHAM HEID](#) PUBLISHED: MAY 31, 2018 3:00 PM EDT

 [SAVE ARTICLE](#)



GETTY IMAGES

You're not proud of it, but you had unprotected sex and now you're worried if the escapade may come with consequences. You're not the first guy to wonder how soon symptoms might show up if your worst fears are realized and you picked up

a sexually transmitted infection (STI).

But first: Understand that just because you don't have symptoms—immediately or ever—doesn't mean you're necessarily in the clear.

“The most important thing to highlight is that the majority of STDs—be it gonorrhea, chlamydia, or herpes—tend to be asymptomatic, meaning they don't cause symptoms,” says Khalil Ghanem, MD, PhD, an associate professor of medicine at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine.

“The most important thing to highlight is that the majority of STDs tend to be asymptomatic.”

Ghanem says 90 percent of people with gonorrhea and chlamydia will not have symptoms, while the same is true of 70 percent of those with herpes.

But even if your STD is asymptomatic, you can still infect your partner. You could also be at greater risk for serious complications—everything from arthritis to cancer—if your STD goes untreated. The only way to be sure you're STD free after an unprotected sexual encounter is to be screened, Ghanem says.

Now that we're clear on that, let's get back to your original question. How soon would symptoms show up? “For most STDs, usually sometime between 3 days and 10 days after exposure,” Ghanem says.

Symptoms could include a strange or “burning” discharge while you're peeing, Ghanem says. They could also include painful or painless sores, blisters, or lumps around your genitals, anus or mouth—depending on the type of sex (vaginal, anal, oral) you were having, he explains. A skin rash, fever, swollen lymph nodes, and sore testicles are all considered secondary symptoms of common STDs like syphilis or gonorrhea, according to the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (CDC).

Most STDs show symptoms within 3 to 10 days after exposure.

The major exception to that “3 to 10 days” timeframe is herpes. “Ulcers for herpes could occur weeks, months, or even years after exposure,” Ghanem says. In some cases, ulcer outbreaks can come and go at regular intervals for the remainder of a person’s lifetime. There’s no cure for herpes, but there are drugs that can reduce the frequency and intensity of outbreaks and also reduce the odds you’ll spread herpes to a partner.

The other exception is human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). Stage 1 of the virus usually causes a flu-like fever two to four weeks after transmission, the CDC says. But people with HIV may not experience this Stage 1 flu at all, which is why it’s important to be tested. Blood tests for HIV pick up the virus 99.5 percent of the time.

At the end of the day, keeping an eye out for symptoms really doesn’t matter much. If you want to be sure you’re STI free, you need to be screened, Ghanem says.



MARKHAM HEID

Markham Heid is an experienced health reporter and writer, has contributed to outlets like TIME, Men’s Health, and Everyday Health, and has received reporting awards from the Society of Professional Journalists and the Maryland, Delaware, and D.C. Press Association.

WATCH NEXT



