

# The Gift You Don't Want This Christmas (or Ever)

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'I didn't think it would happen to me' or 'It was just the one time' or 'He seemed like such a nice guy' is what many of my patients say with regret in their voice. As a consultant gynaecologist, I am seeing many more young women nowadays with health problems as a result of Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs). Sadly carrying STIs such as **chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhoea, herpes, genital warts or HIV** has nothing to do with how nice someone is as a person. Having unprotected sex even once can leave you with an infection that can affect your health for the rest of your life.

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These infections have been steadily increasing all over the world. **Young people under the age of 25** and men who have sex with men (gay and bisexual) are most at risk of getting STIs.

Anyone can get a sexually transmitted infection. And there are often no physical symptoms at all: nine out ten women and seven out of ten men have no symptoms when they have a **chlamydial** infection, which is the most common of all STIs.

Women who do experience symptoms may notice an unusual or persistent vaginal discharge, find sex is recently painful or have irregular periods. Some may feel unwell with a fever or tummy pain or a rash. In all these situations, it is important to seek medical advice sooner than later.

People may feel embarrassed to ask their partner to use a condom and even if the risk of infections did cross their mind, they did not want to ruin the spontaneity of the moment and hoped they would be fine. Others say they feel uncomfortable implying their partner may have an STI. But you don't have to have slept with a lot of people to carry an infection - just one other is enough.

Unprotected sexual intercourse puts women at the risk of catching an STI, which in turn

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may lead to a legacy of pelvic pain, **Pelvic Inflammatory disease**(PID) and weeks of harsh medications. Other longer term issues may include infertility, **ectopic pregnancy** as well as an increased risk of cervical cancer because of high risk **Human Papilloma Virus** (HPV) infections. **HIV** infection may sadly become apparent often years down the line, with one in five people with HIV not knowing that they have it.

Condoms significantly reduce the chance of catching these infections, though not completely. More women should be carrying them around, rather than finding themselves in a situation without one. Unfortunately, the best way to completely avoid STIs may be to avoid sex with more than one partner - but that's hardly practical advice in this day and age. So instead, make sure your partner - even if it's your regular one - has had a sexual health check recently. And unless you're totally sure that they've got the all-clear, insist on a condom.

For women too, there's the added chance of falling pregnant. In fact, I see many women nowadays in their 40s and 50s in new relationships, horrified that they have an STI and sometimes an unwanted pregnancy - having thought they could not get pregnant because they are older.

Men too must protect themselves. I would advise men to wear a latex condom and if using lubricants, only use water-based products as oil-based lubricants can reduce efficacy of a condom in preventing STIs.. If either partner is allergic to latex, then use non-latex condoms made from approved synthetic materials as they are equally protective against STIs and pregnancy as **latex condoms**. On the other hand, condoms from natural materials do not protect against STIs, which can be just as much a problem for men: syphilis and gonorrhoea cause joint problems, fever, discharge and rashes and genitals warts can be recurrent. Meanwhile, even a silent infection like HPV can increase the incidence of **oral cancers**, especially in men. And most worryingly, there were 6,000 new cases of HIV in the UK last year alone.

I would advise all women to use double protection: condoms and an effective contraceptive, such as the **Pill** or a **Long Acting Reversible Contraceptive (LARC)** e.g. an implant. Also, be aware that binge drinking of alcohol can increase risk taking and the chance of having unprotected sex and of catching STIs. And have that conversation about using a condom, however awkward you may feel, so you don't regret it.

If you do have unprotected sex, do get checked promptly at your **local sexual health clinic** (GUM clinic) as soon as you can, so you can get the right treatment as early as possible. Treatment is available for most conditions. It's completely confidential and you can

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have access to counselling too and discuss various vaccines available to protect you from STIs.

So this Christmas, whether you are a man or a woman, young or old, give yourself the gift of good health and avoid any nasty surprises for the New Year.