

Checking a client

Checking every client is essential. This fact sheet explains how to protect your sexual health by checking male and female clients for sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It also explains what to do if you think your client has an STI.

Why do I have to check my clients?

Even if you use a condom every time a penis enters your mouth, vagina or anus, you can still be exposed to some STIs. Some STIs, especially crabs, herpes and genital warts, can be transmitted from the uncovered genital area. Sometimes condoms break, even when you use plenty of lube and make sure that you put them on properly.

Some STIs don't show up when you check a client (like HIV), which is why you insist on using a condom every time. But if you check a client and you think they have an STI, you have the right to refuse to see them.

If you are unsure of what to look for when checking a client, ask another worker or contact your local sexual health clinic.

Checking a male client

- Do the check **BEFORE** he urinates or has a shower and washes away any discharge.
- Try to make him feel comfortable by explaining that the check is for their good as well as for yours.
- Tell them you check everyone - including regulars. Develop a routine that works for you.
- Take the client to where the light is good, or take a penlight or small torch to work and use that.
- Get your eye level down to their genitals so that you can have a good look. Just opening the fly of his pants is not good enough. It's best to have his pants right off so that you can look at the balls, between his legs and anal area. Even if you are not offering services involving the anal area, you **MUST** still check.
- Part the pubic hair and look for crabs and their eggs. Pull gently along the hair with your fingernails and look for public lice (pinhead size lumps or anything that moves).
- Check the head and shaft of the penis for sores, cracks in the skin, a red rash, herpes sores or blisters, warts, pimples or ulcers. Don't touch them if you can avoid it. If you do, make sure you wash your hands with warm soapy water.
- If the penis is not circumcised, pull the foreskin back and check for any swelling, discharge, sores, cuts, warts and ulcers. Cheesy discharge under the foreskin is not necessarily the sign of any disease - it's just bad hygiene.
- Check the entire genital area - between the legs and around the anus for any other lumps, sores, ulcers, pimples, broken skin, warts or rashes.
- Before the penis is erect, milk it firmly by running your thumb and finger from the base to the tip in one firm motion. A cloudy, milky or yellowish discharge, unusual smell, pus or blood is not healthy and can be the signs of infection. Make sure you know the difference from normal (clear) pre cum fluid.

Fact sheet for sex workers

Symptoms of STIs

Be aware of the following symptoms of STIs around the penis and scrotum:

- burning, stinging, pain or irritation when passing urine
- urinating more often than usual, or blood in urine
- clear, milky or yellow discharge or any unusual discharge or blood
- a sore, blister, ulcers, wart, rash or skin breaks on the penis or around the genital area
- itchy red spotty rash, usually all over the penis including the head
- painful swelling of the head
- painful swelling, discharge with pus or narrowing of the foreskin if uncircumcised
- deep genital pain and groin tenderness
- difficulty with maintaining an erection
- pain, tenderness or swelling in the balls.

Checking a female client

If your client is female, have a good look for any lumps, sores, ulcers, pimples, broken skin, warts, rashes or discharges.

Sometimes, women can have no signs or symptoms of STI's because infections can be deep inside the vagina. Do not insert fingers into the vagina to check.

Some women can have thrush. This is not an STI but can be sexually transmitted.

Vaginal symptoms of STIs

A healthy vaginal discharge is the fluid that the vagina produces to keep itself moist. A healthy discharge is usually whitish and dries yellowish on underpants. It varies through the monthly cycle.

Watch out for:

- changes in colour or smell of vaginal discharge
- unusual discharge or blood
- burning, stinging, pain or irritation when passing urine
- an itchy or sore vagina
- blood in the urine or urinating more often than usual

- a sore, blister, ulcers, warts, rashes or skin breaks on the vulva, lips or around the genital area
- pain during sex, low abdominal pain or deep genital pain and tenderness.

Checking before oral contact

If you are going to let the client kiss you, or go down on you, then check their mouth for sores, cuts or bleeding gums.

Checking before anal sex

If you are going to have insertive anal sex, then check the client very carefully. Ask them if they have prepared themselves by cleaning out their anal passage. If you need to be specific, you can ask them how long since their last bowel movement.

If you don't trust their answer, then you can check by putting a condom on your finger and slipping it in. It's much better to check beforehand otherwise you may be in for a nasty surprise.

Symptoms of STIs

Also check around the anal area for:

- any sores, warts, ulcers, blisters, rashes, pimples or skin breaks
- anal discomfort or swelling
- anal discharge with pus, mucus or blood
- pain on using bowels.

Other possible symptoms of STIs

- Non-itchy rash on palms of hands or soles of feet
- Persistent sore throat and pain on swallowing
- Tiny grey or reddish-brown eggs that look like scabs attached to the shafts of pubic hair or black specks in underwear
- Blisters or red inflamed areas on your mouth, fingers, buttocks and torso and eyes
- Waxy, pale raised spots like pimples with a pit-like centre - anything from 1 to 10 mm wide and with a red sore ring around them, usually on the groin area, lower abdomen and thighs rather than on the genitals.

After checking clients, it is important that you wash your hands thoroughly.

What to do if you find a STI

If the check is clear, say something nice to encourage good habits!

If you find something wrong, the client may be genuinely surprised or upset, as most members of the general public do not get regular STI checks. Some may be aware that there is a problem and try to get you to ignore it by pretending to be surprised or angry. Don't back down and don't allow them to manipulate you.

If you are not sure, get a second opinion from another worker or staff member. Do not attempt to diagnose. Try to back each other up even if no one is sure, it is better to be safe than sorry. Remember, the second opinion never overrides yours!

Suggest your client goes to a sexual health clinic to get proper attention and explain that most STI's can be treated and sooner rather than later is better for everyone.

Five things to remember

- Look for lumps, bumps, discharges and critters.
- Check every client (even regular clients).
- It is your right to refuse a client.
- Losing a client is better than getting an STI and having to take time off work with no pay.
- Stay polite and in control even if clients get angry.

Sexual health checks

Safe sex practices are only half of the story. To protect yourself as a sex worker, it's important to get your sexual health checked regularly to ensure that you detect any STI infections early and get treatment. This helps to minimise lost shifts because of sickness, or having an outbreak of herpes or thrush, which can make working pretty uncomfortable and riskier for HIV infection.

The research for this fact sheet was taken from The Sex Workers handbook, a Sydney Sex Worker Outreach Project resource.