

Sexually Transmitted Diseases and the Oral Cavity

A Practical Guide for Dentists and Dental Teams

Why it matters

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) remain a major global public health concern, especially among adolescents and young adults. Oral sex is a common practice and can lead to the transmission of several STIs that may show **oral manifestations**.

Dental teams are well placed to identify oral signs of STIs during routine examinations, provide prevention advice and patient education, support timely referral for diagnosis and treatment, and discuss sexual health in a professional, respectful, and non-judgmental manner.

Early detection by dental professionals can prevent complications and reduce further transmission.



Main STIs Involving the Oral Cavity

Chlamydia trachomatis & Neisseria gonorrhoeae

- Can infect the **oropharynx** after oral sex
- Frequently **asymptomatic**, which makes screening important
- Oral gonococcal infections may present with painful pharyngitis and cervical lymphadenopathy

Untreated infections may lead to serious complications such as infertility.

Dentists play an important role in identifying these signs during routine oral examinations, facilitating timely diagnosis and treatment.

Syphilis

- Transmitted through oral, vaginal, or anal sexual contact, from mother to child during pregnancy, or through blood transfusion

Clinical stages:

- **Primary syphilis:** Oral chancre (tongue, lips, gums, palate)
- **Secondary syphilis:** Rash, fever, lymphadenopathy
- **Latent syphilis:** No symptoms
- **Tertiary syphilis:** Cardiovascular and neurological damage

Oral lesions are common for primary syphilis, often appearing on the tongue, palate, gums, or lips and often detected by dentists.

Hepatitis (A, B, C, D, E)

- Transmitted through blood, sexual contact, or contaminated food and water

Possible oral signs:

- Jaundice
- Oral bleeding
- Petechiae and bruising

Dentists can observe these signs during oral examinations and refer patients for further medical evaluation.

Prevention:

Hepatitis B vaccination is strongly recommended

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

- Present in blood and body fluids, including saliva
- Oral transmission is **rare**, due to inhibitory factors in saliva

Common oral manifestations:

- Oral candidiasis (which may be detected during routine dental examinations)
- Linear gingival erythema
- Necrotizing gingivitis or periodontitis
- Oral hairy leukoplakia - Kaposi's sarcoma

Early recognition and referral for antiretroviral therapy are essential.

Herpes Simplex Virus (HSV-1 and HSV-2)

- Transmitted by direct mucosal contact during oral sex
- Primary infection may cause acute herpetic gingivostomatitis

Untreated infections may lead to serious complications such as infertility.

Dentists can provide early diagnosis and advice on preventing the spread of herpes.

Prevention and care:

- Avoid oral contact during symptomatic outbreaks
- Antiviral therapy reduces symptoms but does not prevent transmission

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)

- Transmitted through mucosal contact
- Some types are associated with **oropharyngeal cancer**

Oral lesions include:

- Oral warts
- Squamous papillomas
- Condyloma acuminata

Dentists may detect HPV-related oral lesions during routine check-ups emphasizing their preventive role.

Prevention:

- HPV vaccination significantly reduces infection rates and cancer risk.



Recommendations for prevention & professional responsibilities

Primary prevention

- Safe sex practices (condoms, dental dams)
- Vaccination (HPV, Hepatitis B)
- Screening in high-risk populations

Secondary prevention

- Early detection and treatment of STIs
- Collaboration between dental and medical professionals
- Taking a sexual history using the **Five P's**: Partners, Practices, Protection, Pregnancy prevention, Past STIs

Ethical Considerations

Standard infection control measures are sufficient in dental practice.

Excessive precautions should be avoided, as they may create fear or stigma. Patients with STIs must never be discriminated against.

Managing STIs effectively requires an integrated approach across healthcare disciplines. Dentists and dental teams are essential contributors to the prevention, early detection and control of STIs.

