Is there a difference between bacterial and viral STIs? [1]

Hey Alice,

What's the difference between a bacterial and viral STD?

Answer

Dear Reader,

The main difference between these two categories of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), now more commonly referred to as sexually transmitted infections, or STIs, is what causes them? bacterial STIs are caused by bacteria and viral STIs are caused by viruses. As a result of being caused by different microorganisms, bacterial and viral STIs vary in their treatment. Bacterial STIs, such as gonorrhea, syphilis, and chlamydia, are often cured with antibiotics. Viral STIs, such as HIV, HPV (which may cause certain types of cancers and genital warts), herpes, and hepatitis?the four Hs?have no cure. However many of their symptoms can be alleviated with treatment. And fortunately, there are vaccines available to help prevent both HPV [2] and hepatitis [3]; talking with your health care provider about whether you should be vaccinated for either of these infections is a good idea.

In addition to bacteria and viruses, STIs can also be caused by protozoa (trichomoniasis) and other organisms (crabs/pubic lice and scabies). These STIs can be cured with antibiotics or topical creams/lotions.

One of the most common symptoms of an STI is no symptom (for example, up to 75 percent of women and 50 percent of men diagnosed with chlamydia may not experience symptoms), so it's important to get tested for STIs when you think you may have been exposed. STIs need to be diagnosed correctly and fully treated as soon as possible to avoid complications that could be serious and/or permanent. The American Sexual Health Association [4] is one comprehensive place for information and resources about STI symptoms, treatment, and much more.

Most of all, prevention rules. If you're sexually active with more than one person, or with someone who's sexually active with others, "respect yourself, protect yourself" by having safer sex and getting regular check-ups. To learn more about specific STIs and safer sex strategies, check out the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health Archive [5].

Alice!
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