Can I get an STI from masturbating? [1]

Dear Alice,

I'm 18 years old and have never had sex. But three years ago, I started masturbating. And this past week I have been having swelling in my vagina. You can't get any STD on your own, can you? I'm scared to go to the doctor because I don't want my Mom to know I have been doing this. Please respond.

Answer

Dear Reader,

You cannot get a sexually transmitted infection (STI) from masturbating on your own. This is true regardless of your gender and how you masturbate. It is useful to know how you masturbate, on the outside rubbing your clitoris, with penetration, or both. If you use penetration, then the swelling can be caused by vigorous stimulation of your vulva while masturbating. It might help to think about whether or not your solo sex style has changed at all recently. For example, are you masturbating in a new way? More frequently? With more intensity?

It is also possible that your vaginal opening is swollen from being aroused. Blood flows into the genital area when someone is aroused, and this causes the genitals to swell. (Think of an erect penis? Not very different if you consider the swelling!)

You said that you have never had sex. By this, do you mean sexual intercourse, penetration, no sexual contact at all, or something in between? One thing to keep in mind is that there are some STIs that can be transmitted through close intimate contact, even if there's been no penetration. Some, like crabs and scabies, can also travel on sheets and towels.

In some states, when minors (people younger than eighteen years) receive medical services, their parents are contacted for permission beforehand. Since you are eighteen, parental notification is probably not an issue. It's still understandable that you're concerned or scared to see a health care provider for fear of your mom finding out that you are masturbating. First, this is a private thing that your mom does not need to know about. Second, if residing in the United States, people your age as well as minors have rights to confidential reproductive health care. What this means is that unless you consent or give permission to your health care provider, s/he cannot disclose your medical records to anyone, including your parents (except for minors in the case of abortion services, which depends on your particular state's law). It might be a good idea to get things checked out with a health care provider (more on
how to do this in a minute) if the swelling doesn't go away in a few days, or if you've noticed other changes in your genital area. If you experience itching, burning when you urinate, or a change in your vaginal discharge, let your provider know. S/he can check for signs of a yeast infection, STI, or other infection.

If you are worried about cost, insurance coverage, or your mom finding out by accident, you can make an appointment at Planned Parenthood [2] or at another low-cost clinic in your area. Read the Related Q&As listed below for more information about finding services near you.

Maybe you're worried about simply explaining your need to see a gynecologist or other health care provider to your mom. If so, remember that you have a right to privacy, and you don't have to talk about the details of this situation if you don't want to. In reality, your mom has probably wondered at some time or another about her own reproductive health, and whether her "private parts" were normal. She may even masturbate, too! In other words, she might turn out to be a great resource for you. If you go this route, here are a few options of things to say:

- "Mom, did you know that it's recommended that women start having yearly GYN exams at the age of eighteen? I think I'd like to go soon. Is there someone you'd recommend so that I can make an appointment?"
- "I'd like to make an appointment to see a doctor. I just want to check in and make sure everything is okay with my personal health (or genitals, privates, vulva, 'down there,' reproductive parts, women's parts)."
- "I've been reading a lot about women's health lately. I've decided that I want to learn some more by talking with an expert about my health."

Check the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health [3] archives for more info about masturbation, STIs, and gynecological exams.

Alice!
Category: Sexual & Reproductive Health [4]
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Related questions

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The pill ? where do I get it and do my parents have to know? [8]
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Resources

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Published date: Dec 23, 1999
Last reviewed on: Apr 07, 2015