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## Telling current and past partners about your STI

When Ryan O'Neil said to Ali McGraw "Love means never having to say your sorry" in the 1970 film *Love Story* she clearly didn't have sexually transmitted infections (STIs) on her mind. Love, respect or even simple human compassion means that if you acquire an STI you have to make sure that, one way or another, others who need to know are informed.

### Why bother to tell?

Most people with an STI will not know they have an infection. Informing them will give them the opportunity to access the treatment they need.

Many STIs have [long-term complications](#). Telling your partner will give them the opportunity to make informed decisions about their own health. They may well want to get tested themselves, obtain treatment and take precautions not to pass the infection to others.

There may also be implications for your own health and life choices. Getting your current partner treated will lessen your risk of getting re-infected. Also, if untreated, some STIs can affect fertility and lower your chances of starting a family.

A contact tracing service (see below) will contact your current partner for you, but many people prefer to tell the partner themselves, particularly if they hope to continue the relationship.

### How do you tell your partner about your STI?

Let's face it, this will not be an easy conversation. However let's assume, for all the reasons above, that you want to inform your partner that you have an STI. How should you approach this?

## **Don't beat yourself up**

Make your partner aware that you are telling them because you care for them and realise what might happen if they were left in ignorance. Be proud of the fact that you have taken the decision to tell them and found the courage to carry it through. You are more likely to retain their respect if you are honest from the start than if they found out later (for example, if they were diagnosed after they developed symptoms). Imagine what you would feel like if the situation were reversed. How would you want them to act and what would you want them to say?

## **Be direct**

Some people find it best to approach the subject before the next occasion arises to have sex. You could use the opportunity to say that you have just been diagnosed with an STI and need to talk about protection. You may feel it unnecessary to reveal all the details of previous relationships. However, showing that you are ready to be open and prepared to talk may help to put your partner at ease.

## **Give your partner time to react**

Different people react differently. Some may be surprised, some may be shocked, some may panic. Some may ask lots of questions, others may go quiet for a while. Whatever their reaction, your partner will need time to absorb the information. Make it clear that you don't expect them to make decisions (for example, about sex, or the future of your relationship) immediately. Respect their space and give them time to think.

## **Give your partner the facts**

Your partner may well have a lot of questions, such as what the symptoms are, what tests are needed and what treatment is available. Give your partner time to talk and be a patient listener. You may have been given printed information from the sexual health clinic which you can share with them. If you don't know the answer to a question say so, but you may want to get on the internet and find out the answer together.

## What about previous partners?

Telling your current partner may be an easy decision. But what about previous sexual partners? How far back should you go? Anyone you have had sexual contact with in the past few months should be informed, Your doctor or nurse will advise you. Whilst many people want to tell their current partner personally, they may be less keen to contact previous partners, especially if they parted on less than friendly terms.

Fortunately, local genitourinary medicine (GUM) clinics are prepared to contact people for you. You just need to give them the contact details (a phone number is the preferred option) and let them do the rest. They will keep your name confidential and will not contact anyone without your permission. You can search for your nearest clinic through the Family Planning Association (FPA) ['Find A Clinic'](#) service.

## What if you think you got the STI from your current partner?

There may be circumstances in which you are certain that you acquired the STI from your current partner. For example, you may never have had sex at all before your current relationship or had a check giving you the 'all clear' before this relationship started. Your first reaction may well be one of shock. If you are in an exclusive relationship it is natural to feel hurt and betrayed. Remember however that some STIs can lay dormant for a long time, and your partner may have picked up the infection well before they started a relationship with you.

Once the initial shock is over, you need to think through the situation logically. In today's liberated times, people may start a new relationship in the expectation that they and their partner will have had previous sexual experiences. However sensible it may be, not everyone gets screened for STIs before having sex with a new partner. This may be through ignorance, fear or good old-fashioned apathy.

We are all human and we all make mistakes. The poet, Alexander Pope, said: "To err is human, to forgive divine." You'll need to have an open and honest talk with your partner and get some answers to some questions.

- Is it likely that your partner acquired the infection before they started a relationship with you?

- Did your partner get tested before they had sex with you?
- Is it likely your partner knew they had an STI but didn't tell you?
- Is it likely your partner picked up an STI while still having a relationship with you?

Once you have got some answers, you will be in a better position to think about when you need to re-assess the future of your relationship.

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