

STI testing through private providers

More is not always better! The tests you don't need from a sexual health service

If you have paid for sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing online or in a clinic, you may have been tested for organisms (bugs) that are normally present in that part of the body and not thought to cause harm. Services that offer these tests may not be regulated and, unlike NHS services, may not follow national guidelines. Testing for these organisms may result in treatment with antibiotics that are not needed or might not benefit a person's health. This leaflet explains why these organisms are not tested for or treated in the NHS, and the potential problem with taking unnecessary antibiotics.

Which organisms are not tested for in NHS services?

- *Mycoplasma hominis* (MH) (not to be confused with *Mycoplasma genitalium*)
- *Ureaplasma parvum* (UP)
- *Ureaplasma urealyticum* (UU)
- *Herpes simplex*, unless you have symptoms suggestive of herpes

If I have tested positive for one of these organisms, do I need treatment?

No. MH, UP and UU are commonly found in the genitals without causing any harm and currently there is no evidence that they will cause harm if not treated. If you do not have symptoms of herpes, no treatment is needed.

Can I have treatment anyway?

Sometimes testing for certain organisms can do more harm than good. Using antibiotics to treat non-harmful organisms can lead to resistance in other bacteria that *are* harmful, which means that treatments might not work. Antibiotics can cause side effects and can disrupt the balance of normal bacteria in your body, so taking them when not needed is never advisable.

Why are these organisms not tested for in an NHS clinic?

Testing in the NHS must be beneficial to patients and the public and cost effective. There is currently no evidence that the benefits of testing for and treating MH, UU and UP are greater than the harms of unnecessary antibiotics. Being "diagnosed" with one of these organisms also causes a lot of undue worry in people and their partners.

Being told that you are carry herpes simplex is not useful. The blood test that people sometimes pay for is unreliable and often gives a false positive or false negative result.

Can I pass these organisms to a partner?

Although like many other organisms, MH, UP and UU can be passed on via sex, they are not STIs because they are normal organisms and not infections. They are not managed in the same way as STIs like chlamydia and gonorrhoea. Your sexual partners do not need to be tested or treated.

You are unlikely to pass herpes simplex on to a partner if you do not have symptoms. If you develop symptoms, you should avoid sex until the symptoms have gone away.

What infections do I need to be tested for if I have had condomless sex?

Testing for chlamydia, gonorrhoea, HIV, syphilis and sometime hepatitis is offered as part of a full sexual health check-up in people who don't have symptoms. You may be offered testing for other infections depending on the symptoms you have. Please discuss your symptoms with a healthcare professional. Sexual health consultations, STI testing, STI treatment and related advice are all free of charge in NHS services.

I have had a test for *Gardnerella vaginalis*. What is it?

The vagina normally contains 'good' bacteria (called lactobacilli) and also some 'bad' bacteria (called anaerobes). *Gardnerella vaginalis* is one of the 'bad' bacteria which is usually found in the vagina without causing any symptoms, and treatment isn't needed. Bacterial vaginosis (BV) is a common cause of abnormal vaginal discharge and odour which can develop when *Gardnerella vaginalis* is present in higher amounts, and this can be treated with antibiotics.

BV is diagnosed by examining a swab under a microscope in someone with typical symptoms. If you think you have symptoms of BV, you should attend your local sexual health clinic where swabs can be taken to look under a microscope and help understand the cause of your symptoms. You can find more information about BV in our patient information leaflet at:

https://www.bashh.org/userfiles/pages/files/resources/bv_pil_screen_edit.pdf

Vaginal microbiome testing

Tests for a range of vaginal bacteria and yeasts are being sold online but are not a necessary part of having a sexual health check. Vaginal microbiome testing claims to give insight into some gynaecological problems by detecting different vaginal organisms that they say are sexually transmitted or cause genital symptoms. This is misleading. There's no proof that treating these organisms leads to better outcomes, so testing is not recommended.

This leaflet was produced by the Clinical Effectiveness Group of the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH). The information in the leaflet is based on the 'British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) position statement on the inappropriate use of multiplex testing platforms, and suboptimal antibiotic treatment regimens for bacterial sexually transmitted infections' published by BASHH in November 2021.

For more information regarding BASHH: <https://www.bashh.org/resources/guidelines>

The leaflet was developed following The Information Standard principles developed by NHS England. For more information: www.england.nhs.uk/tis/the-info-standard/

If you would like to comment on this leaflet, e-mail us at: admin@bashh.org.uk. Please type 'Private STI testing PIL' in the subject box.

Copyright BASHH 2024. This leaflet was first published XX/2024. Revision date 2029.

DRAFT