

Surfing itself rarely has an adverse effect on sexual health, unless one is unlucky enough to collide with a surfboard in a very specific way. If that happens, all you need to know is to seek medical attention straight away but very few people would probably need any encouragement to do that. This chapter is therefore focused on matters related to travelling.

Most travel which is primarily geared towards surfing takes place in the developing world, and most travelers are from the developed world. Sexually transmitted infections (STI's), are more common in the developing world, so your chances of picking up something nasty are higher on the road than at home. Despite this, travelers are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviour, such as casual or paid-for sex, while travelling than they would at home.

The ABC of preventing STI's is Abstain, Be faithful, Condomise. Understandably, for many people A is not a viable option. Some people also struggle with B. However, failing A and B, if you can't stick to C reliably and invariably, trouble will find you.

Condoms are highly effective in preventing transmission of STI's, provided

- a) you are still sober enough to put it on properly, and
- b) it has not been lying at the bottom of your duffel bag, or of the street vendor's cart where you had just bought it from, for the past decade.

Be aware that some STI's can also be spread through oral sex; giving oral sex carries a much higher risk than receiving it.

The most common STI's roughly in order of increasing nastiness, are:

Trichomonas – a parasite that may cause discomfort and discharge in women. It doesn't usually bother men, but they can carry and spread it

Herpes – a virus causing blisters on the genitals

HPV (Human Papilloma Virus) – causes genital warts, and some types can lead to cervical cancer in women and cancer of the penis in men.

Gonorrhoea (The Clap) and Chlamydia – bacteria that can cause pain on urination, genital discharge, infections of the testicles in men and the womb in women.

Syphilis – bacterial infection that causes genital lesions, and if left untreated can affect the nervous system, leading to paralysis and insanity.

Hepatitis B and C - viruses that attack the liver, and can lead to liver failure and liver cancer.

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) – progressively breaks down the immune system, leading to death within a few years if left untreated.

Treatment can only prevent progression of the disease, it can't be cured.

The following are possible symptoms of STI's, that should prompt you to seek medical attention as soon as possible:

- any genital lesion
- discomfort during urination
- any genital discharge
- pain or swelling of the testicles or glands in your groin.

You should then be tested for a wide range of STI's, as different infections often spread and occur together. HIV can take as long as 6 months after infection to show up on the standard test, so anyone who picks up an STI with an initial negative HIV test should be retested in 6 months' time. You should also get tested if you have had sex without a condom with a new or casual partner, even if you don't have any symptoms.

Testing is uncomfortable and nerve wracking to most people, but the quicker you have a result, the more effective treatment can be. Hepatitis and HIV can take months or even years before causing any symptoms.

The standard treatment for the bugs that cause genital discharge can be taken before the onset of symptoms. I'm hesitant even to mention this, as it might serve only to provide a false sense of security, but many people seem to wonder about it when the paranoia strikes the following morning. Always remember they do NOTHING against any of the other nasties. A cocktail of 3 different antibiotics is used to treat genital discharge:

For Gonorrhoea: most commonly treated with an injection, but the antibiotic which can do the same in pill form is called cefixime (most common brand name Suprax). 400 mg as a single dose is the recommended treatment.

For Chlamydia: a single dose of 1 gram of an antibiotic called azithromycin (most common brand name Zithromax).

For Trichomonas: a single dose of 2 gram of metronidazole (most common brand name Flagyl). Many people believe one can't drink when taking antibiotics. There are actually not many antibiotics for which this is the case, but for metronidazole it's definitely true. You'll feel like you're dying, or rather, you'd wish that you could rather die.

(This reaction was used widely to prevent alcoholics from relapsing, but is now generally considered to be barbaric.)

Travellers who are on the contraceptive pill should make sure they have enough to last them their entire trip – your brand might not be available where you're going and even if it is, obtaining any medication in foreign countries can be a headache. Be

especially prudent about taking it everyday – it's easy to get caught up in all the excitement and disruption of your usual routine. When crossing time zones and you want to keep taking it in the morning, if you're used to taking it in the morning, rather let less hours elapse before your next pill, than more. Many antibiotics do make the pill less effective, so if you need to take some for whatever reason, use condoms for additional contraception until 2 days after your last dose of antibiotic. In a worst case scenario, if you're on the pill, taking antibiotics and then have sex without a condom, consider taking the morning-after pill. The pill does nothing to prevent STIs, so a condom should be used additionally anyway when having sex with any new or casual partner.

Some people develop fungal infections in skin folds, particularly below the belt if they walk around in wet boardies all day in humid environments. This may cause redness, itching and fine white flakes forming in the skin folds. It's not serious and usually disappears with fresh air, some sunlight and drying of well and putting on dry clothes when you get out of the water. If that doesn't get rid of it fast enough for our liking, some simple antifungal cream or ointment, which is available without prescription in most countries, will sort it out.

All of this applies anywhere in the world, while travelling or not, but bear it in mind particularly when hitting the road. Be sensible, but above all, be safe.