

Growing up is an exciting time, but as you develop into a young woman, you need to be aware of diseases that often affect young ladies. These include:

- HIV/ AIDS:
 - South Africa has the world's highest number of HIV infections. The virus affects the body's ability to fight off other infections. The virus cannot be cured at this stage, but can be well controlled on the appropriate medications. It's important to protect yourself from contracting HIV, which is usually passed on from unprotected sex, the mixing of blood from an affected person and from mom to child during pregnancy and birth. It's very important to use condoms to prevent the spread of HIV. Knowing your HIV status is as easy as a 10 min finger prick test, so go to your clinic and get it done today!
- Breast Cancer:
 - Breast cancer is a common cancer affecting women AND men in our country. It can be treated if detected early. One can do this by doing regular breast self examinations and seeking medical help when any abnormalities are detected, eg. lumps, change in skin colour over breasts, orange peel like skin changes, and nipple inversion. As one gets older, mammograms also help to detect breast abnormalities.
- Cervical Cancer:
 - Cervical cancer is another cancer commonly affecting South African women. The cervix is the mouth of the womb. This is a nasty cancer, but can also be prevented and detected early. Cervical cancer is caused by the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). Vaccines are available to protect you against some strains of this bug, and can be taken after the age of 9. Additionally, papsmears are essential in early detection of cervical cancer. These can be done once you become sexually active, and is a quick procedure which can be performed in the clinic or doctor's rooms.
- Ovarian cancer:
 - Ovarian cancer is a rarer, but more severe cancer, and affects the ovaries. The ovaries are responsible for producing eggs. Some signs could include loss of appetite, weight loss, abnormal periods and abdominal pain. Family history also plays an important role, as with most cancers.
- STDS:
 - Sexually transmitted diseases or infections are passed on from one partner to the next during unprotected sex. Examples are HIV, syphilis, gonorrhoea, genital warts, hepatitis, herpes, HPV and chlamydia. Each of them present differently and may seem unworrying in the beginning, but unfortunately, they can develop into more severe disease. Certain conditions like syphilis and HIV can even affect the brain. Seek medical attention if you have any abnormal vaginal discharge, warts, sores/ bumps in the vaginal area, or pain on intercourse.
- PID:
 - Pelvic Inflammatory Disease is an infection of the female reproductive organs, usually as a complication of an STD. The female reproductive organs include the cervix, womb, fallopian

tubes and ovaries. This condition can cause severe lower abdominal pain, abnormal vaginal discharge and fever. Luckily, it is easily treated with antibiotics. The best way to prevent PID is by using condoms during sex.

- UTIs:

- Urinary tract infections are commonly seen in women. The reason they are more common in women than in men is because women have a shorter urethra which leads to the bladder. UTIs can affect not only the urethra, but even the bladder and kidneys which lead to a more severe picture. Symptoms of a UTI include burning on peeing, bad smelling urine, peeing more often, change in urine colour, fever, vomiting and lower abdominal pain. UTIs are easily treated with antibiotics and fluids.

- Fibroids:

- Fibroids are non-cancerous growths or lumps which form on the wall of the womb. Many females live with them comfortably without issues. However, sometimes, these lumps can grow quite large and cause abnormal periods and lots of pain. They can be removed if they become problematic.

- Endometriosis:

- Endometriosis is a condition in which the lining of the womb, known as the endometrium, is found growing in patches outside of the womb as well. It can cause very heavy, irregular and extremely painful periods. If you do suffer from irregular periods in any way, you should seek help from a medical professional.

- PCOS:

- Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome is a condition found in women where the ovaries become enlarged by developing small cysts, and there are abnormally high levels of male hormones found in the blood. This leads to abnormal menstruation, excess hair growth, obesity and acne. It can also lead to infertility- the inability to conceive a child. This condition can be treated, so should you suffer from a combination of the above, you should seek medical help.

- Pregnancy:

- The rate of pregnancies in young women are on the rise. Once you start menstruating, the risk of pregnancy is there, should you have any unprotected sex. It is important to remember that a young women's body is physically not fully developed and therefore not ready to carry a child. The younger the pregnant mommy, the more complications there are which could affect both her and her baby. Early signs of pregnancy include missing your period, nausea and vomiting, swollen painful breasts, increased urination and tiredness. Before you become sexually active, it is important to know what contraception method you will be using, to protect yourself and your partner.

- Obesity:

- The South African population is a large one, not only in number but in size too! Obesity is quickly becoming a huge problem as it contributes to the development of many other illnesses like heart disease, kidney disease, cancers, PCOS, mental illness, and the list goes on. It is important to maintain a healthy diet and exercise regularly to help prevent obesity.

- Gender based violence:
 - We live in a country where females are a vulnerable group, often targeted in horribly violent crimes. It's important to always keep yourself safe by creating a good support system, avoiding unsafe situations and reporting any incidents to the police. Always remember that you are never alone, and help is just around the corner.
- Period Poverty:
 - Many girls in our country miss school a few days a month due to their period and not having the resources to deal with this part of life effectively. There are also many different cultural beliefs surrounding menstruation which disempowers females. No girl should ever have to miss school because she doesn't have access to sanitary products, and this is where we come in. We hope to alleviate period poverty and help build our nation to new heights! Females are the future, after all!

As you become sexually active, it is important to use contraception, also known as “family planning” or “prevention”. It helps to prevent pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. It is useful to know what options are available and decide on the best choice for you. Remember that even the best contraception is not 100% successful. The only way to be sure you don’t fall pregnant or contract an STD is from abstaining. Visit your closest clinic or other healthcare facility to chat to a nurse or doctor about your options. Here are the basics:

Types of contraception

- **Barrier:** These forms of contraception prevent the sperm from entering the womb. These forms of contraception are not as good as other forms, so should be used with another form of contraception.
 - Female condoms
 - Male condoms
 - Diaphragm/ cap
- **Hormonal:** These forms of contraception contain small amounts of female reproductive hormones which help to stop the body’s natural hormones from releasing an egg to be fertilised by the sperm. They should be used with barrier contraception to prevent the spread of STDs. These are good forms of contraception.
 - Oral contraceptive pill
 - Implant
 - Patch
 - Ring
 - Injection
- **Intrauterine devices:** These forms of contraception are inserted into the womb and either work by releasing hormones or by irritating the lining of the womb so that the sperm cannot move on to the egg. These are more long term, but excellent forms of contraception.
 - Copper T
 - Hormonal intrauterine device
- **Permanent:** These forms of contraception are not good options for young adults as they are for people who have completed their families and don’t want any more children.
 - Bilateral Tubal Ligation (for women)
 - Vasectomy (for men)