

Three Sexually Transmitted Diseases Women Should Know About: Chlamydia, Human Papillomavirus, and Trichomoniasis

Introduction

Every year, more than 15 million cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) occur in the United States. Teenagers and young adults (those under age 25 years) have most of the new STD cases each year (see figure). Untreated infections put women at risk for such conditions as tubal (ectopic) pregnancy, infertility, chronic pelvic pain, and pregnancy problems.

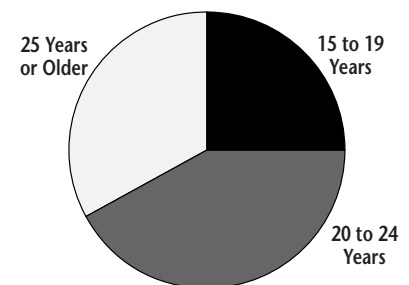
Three Major STDs

Following are facts about three common sexually transmitted diseases in the United States.

- **Chlamydia:** Chlamydia is the most common *bacterial* STD in the United States. It causes about 3 million infections each year, mainly among teens and young adults. In women, untreated chlamydial infections can cause serious complications, including pelvic inflammatory disease (infection of the fallopian tubes), a painful condition that can lead to infertility and other problems. Most women infected with chlamydia have few or no symptoms; without testing and treatment, the infection may continue for months or even years. Symptoms of chlamydia, when they occur, can include unexpected discharge or bleeding from the vagina, a burning feeling when urinating, or pain in the lower abdomen. Chlamydia rates are rising fast in the US, especially among women (see figure), in part because of better screening. It is important to know if you are infected with chlamydia because you can be treated with antibiotics.
- **Human papillomavirus:** Human papillomavirus (HPV) is probably the most common *viral* STD among young, sexually active people. About 5.5 million Americans become infected with HPV each year. HPV sometimes causes genital warts, but in many cases infects people without causing symptoms you can see or feel. HPV is the most common cause of an abnormal Pap smear (a test to check the health of your cervix). Concern about HPV has grown in recent years because infection with certain types of HPV can lead to cervical cancer. Cervical cancer causes 4,500 deaths among women each year. Although no cure for HPV infection exists, the infection may disappear on its own. Also, a number of different treatments can remove visible warts. Pre-cancerous changes in the cervix can be detected with a Pap smear and treated to prevent cancer.
- **Trichomoniasis:** "Trich" is a common vaginal infection. It is caused by a tiny, one-celled organism, called a protozoan. As many as 5 million cases occur each year in the United States. In women, trichomoniasis can cause vaginal itching, redness, and a frothy, yellow-green discharge. The infection may also cause pain or discomfort during sexual intercourse or urination. Trichomoniasis may increase the risk of infection with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), the virus that causes AIDS. Trichomoniasis usually can be cured with an antibiotic.

Young People Have a Much Higher Risk of Getting STDs

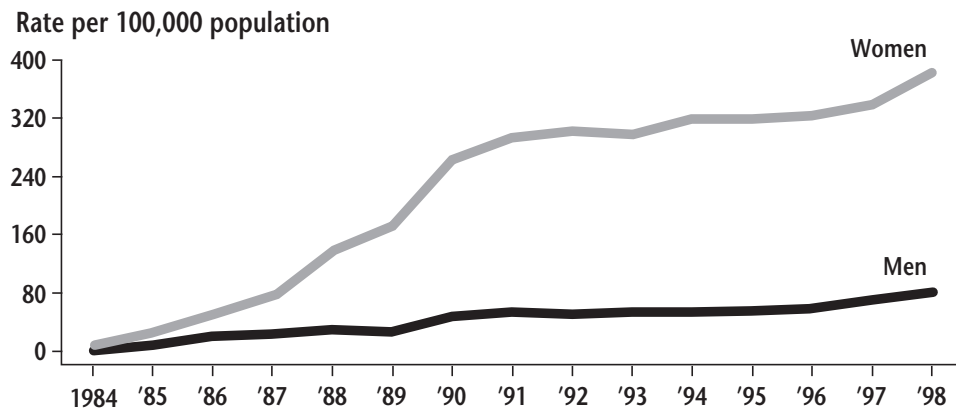
New STD Cases, by Age



Source: Kaiser Family Foundation, American Social Health Association, 1998.

Chlamydia Is on the Rise—Especially among Women

Chlamydia Rate by Sex, 1984 to 1998



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1999.

Screening and Prevention

Screening tests are available to help determine if you have an STD. If you think you might be infected—or if you are at increased risk (young age, new or multiple sex partners, inconsistent use of condoms)—tell your clinician or call your local health department. STD testing usually is *not* done as part of a routine annual exam or gynecologic visit, so it is important to discuss any concerns with your clinician. He or she can examine you and determine which STD tests are right for you.

If you are sexually active, stay with one *faithful* partner who does not have any STDs. Having more than one sexual partner (or having sex with a partner who has multiple partners) greatly increases your risk of getting infected.

When used correctly with *every* act of intercourse, male latex condoms are very effective in preventing a variety of STDs. If you are sexually active or plan to be, ask your clinician for instructions about correct condom use, or call or visit the Web sites of the organizations listed below for more information.

For More Information

For more information about sexually transmitted diseases, including risk factors and ways to protect yourself, contact the following organizations:

American Social Health Association
P.O. Box 13827
Research Triangle Park, NC 27709
Phone: 1-800-227-8922
General Web site:
www.ashastd.org/std/std.html
Teen-oriented Web site:
www.iwannaknow.org

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
Office of Women's Health
1600 Clifton Road, MS: D-51
Atlanta, GA 30033
Phone: 1-404-639-7230
Web site:
www.cdc.gov/od/owh/whstd.htm
National STD Hotline: 1-800-227-8922
National AIDS Hotline: 1-800-342-AIDS

Planned Parenthood Federation of America
810 Seventh Avenue
New York, NY 10019
Phone: 1-800-829-PPFA
Web site:
www.plannedparenthood.org/sti/