

Stay healthy by protecting yourself from STDs

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

At some point in our lives, most of us form romantic relationships. Intimate relationships can enhance our feelings of well-being and bring a sense of happiness, security and stability to our lives. But with intimacy comes responsibility.



Anyone who has sex is at risk for sexually transmitted diseases. Formerly called venereal diseases, sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs, are infections that can be spread from one person to another during sexual contact. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, STDs are common — so common that about 19 million new sexually transmitted disease infections occur each year in the U.S., almost half of them among young people ages 15 to 24.

“Young people have a disproportionate burden, but, really, everyone is at risk for STDs,” says Fred Wyand, spokesman for the American Social Health Association, an organization that focuses on STD prevention. “Part of the problem is that people don’t always perceive that they are at risk. They think STDs happen to other people or that they only happen to

people with a lot of partners. That is what people think, but the fact is everyone is at risk, even if they have only had one or two partners.”

Many STDs are without symptoms, so it’s important to ask your health care provider about getting screened for STDs, to talk to your partner openly about the potential for sexually transmitted infections and to discuss condom use.

You can’t tell if someone has a sexually transmitted disease just by looking at her or him, so it’s important to know the facts if you want to steer clear of becoming infected. Though it might seem difficult, it’s important that you and your partner have a frank discussion “prior to the initiation of sex, not at the time of sex,” says Kimberly Workowski, MD, a professor of medicine at Emory University and a guidelines coordinator in the Division of STD Prevention at CDC.

“Realize that before embarking on a sexual relationship there comes responsibility, and the responsibility is not only to protect yourself but to protect your partner,” Workowski says.

The most reliable way to protect yourself from STDs is to abstain from sex, which means avoiding all types of intimate sexual contact. If celibacy isn’t for you, consider aiming for an exclusive relationship with one partner.

The good news is that sexually transmitted diseases are preventable, and when diagnosed early, many can be treated effectively.



Get checked!



Most STDs affect both men and women, but in many cases, women pay a higher price in terms of health problems. For example, some STDs can lead to infertility. Also, if a

woman is pregnant and has an STD, the infection could cause her baby to have serious health issues. However, most problems can be prevented if the mother receives routine prenatal care that includes screening tests for STDs.

Of the more than 20 types of STDs, the most frequently reported bacterial STD in the United States is chlamydia. STDs also include gonorrhea, genital herpes, HIV/AIDS, human papillomavirus, syphilis and trichomoniasis.

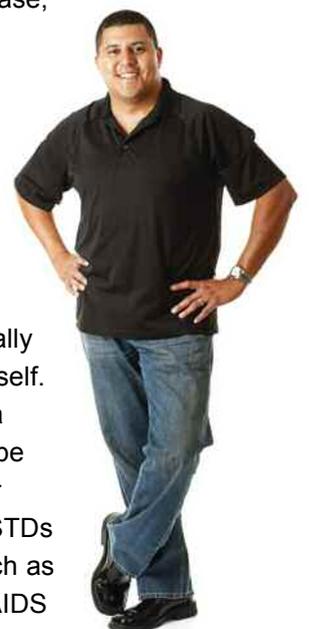
Genital human papillomavirus, or HPV, is the most common sexually transmitted infection. So common is HPV that most people who are sexually active will become infected with HPV at some point in their lives. Most folks who become infected with HPV don’t have symptoms and it usually goes away on its own. But HPV can cause serious health problems, including warts in the genital area as well as cell changes that can lead to a number of HPV-related cancers, including cervical and anal cancer.

“That’s why Pap tests are important, and also why HPV vaccines are also very important,” Wyand says.

Symptoms vary between STDs and can include sores or warts on the genital area, burning while urinating, unusual discharge from the penis or vagina, itching and redness in the genital area, and anal itching, soreness or bleeding.

And don’t forget that HIV is a sexually transmitted disease, Workowski warns, noting that people with sexually transmitted diseases are at increased risk of acquiring HIV.

Talk to your health care provider about getting tested for STDs. Never try to treat a sexually transmitted disease yourself. STDs caused by bacteria or parasites can usually be treated with antibiotics or other medicines. Some STDs caused by viruses — such as genital herpes and HIV/AIDS — can’t be cured, but often can be controlled with medication.



American Public
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Safe sex is important

If you are sexually active, it’s critical to practice safe sex. When used correctly, latex condoms can greatly reduce your risk of acquiring an STD. And keep in mind that birth control pills and spermicides, though effective for preventing pregnancy, will not protect against STDs.

Also be aware that because the population is aging, STDs are on the rise among older Americans.

Photos courtesy iStockphoto: Woman, Steve Debenport; hand, José Antonio Santisto Fernández; man at top, Sean Locke

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