

2005

familydoctor

YOUR ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO HEALTH AND WELLBEING

MIND
& BODY



FEELING
GREAT



COMMON
CONDITIONS



WORKING
WITH YOUR
DOCTOR

PREGNANCY
& NEWBORN



HEALTHY
LIVING



KIDS
& TEENS



MEN

SENIORS



WOMEN



American Academy
of Family Physicians



Using male condoms
correctly can limit
transmission of sexually
transmitted diseases.

Don't be shy about STDs

Do you have a sexually transmitted disease? Are you ashamed to talk about it? Help is just a few brave words away.

By Elaine A. Richman, Ph.D.

Embarrassment. Guilt. These are the words people often use to describe their reluctance to talk about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). One recent survey, for instance, revealed that nearly 90% of women are too ashamed to discuss sexual health with their partner.

But failing to talk is bad news, because it often means failing

to prevent. STDs can lead to medical problems that impact reproductive and general health. Translated: If you can't describe your symptoms — or even discuss the topic generally — you can increase your risk for serious medical consequences.

Equal opportunity diseases

Once called venereal diseases, STDs spread easily through sexual activity, affecting men and women of every socioeconomic group. It may surprise you that in the United States 65 million people are infected with an incurable STD; another 15 million become infected each year.

There are about 20 STDs that can be spread by vaginal, oral or anal sex. The most common are HIV (human immunodeficiency virus, the virus that causes AIDS), chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, ▶

**IT
MAKES
SENSE**

Any one of the symptoms below can signal a sexually transmitted disease. See your doctor immediately.

- itching around the vagina
- discharge from the vagina
- discharge from the penis
- pain during sex
- pain when urinating
- sore throat in people who engage in oral sex
- painful anus in people who engage in anal sex
- painless sores (chancres) around the genital area or anus, or on the tongue and throat
- scaly rash on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet
- dark urine, loose and light-colored stools, and yellow eyes and skin
- small blisters on the genitals that become scabs
- swollen glands, fever and body ache
- unexplained fatigue, weight loss, night sweats and infections
- soft warts in the genital area

genital herpes, human papillomavirus (HPV), hepatitis B and trichomoniasis. Some STDs are easy to cure. Others become a lifelong health problem.

Are you at risk?

Everyone who has had sex is at risk. A few behaviors, however, increase your vulnerability:

- many sexual partners;
- sex with someone who has had many sexual partners;
- vaginal, oral or anal sex without a condom; and
- sex with someone who uses illegal drugs by injection.

About one-fourth of new cases occur in teens. In college students, the most common STDs are genital herpes, chlamydia and hepatitis B. Fortunately, most colleges now recommend that students be vaccinated against hepatitis B.

Because the symptoms aren't always obvious, especially in women, it's hard to know if you have an STD. But even without symptoms, you can be contagious and infect your sex partner. (If you're sexually active with more than one regular partner, it's important to be tested periodically for STDs.) Without treatment, some STDs can spread to the uterus or fallopian tubes, affecting fertility and pregnancy. Some are associated with genital warts, and cervical or other genital cancers. HIV and hepatitis B can be deadly.

You can prevent STDs

The only 100% sure way to prevent STDs is through sexual abstinence. Another way is to limit sex to one uninfected partner who's also monogamous. A third approach — one that can't be stressed too strongly — is through the proper use of male condoms. They can't guarantee 100% protection, but by acting as a barrier against blood, semen or vaginal fluids, they limit exposure to potentially harmful and even sometimes deadly viruses and bacteria. (Female

devices are less effective than male condoms, but they're definitely better than nothing.)

Research shows that condoms can protect against the spread of HIV, chlamydia, gonorrhea and trichomoniasis, not to mention possibly keeping most genital herpes, genital warts and syphilis in check. Proper use calls for employing them for all acts of vaginal, oral and anal sex. Latex condoms provide the best protection; they can be used with a spermicide, nonoxynol-9. One caveat, however. While it's still thought to help kill STD-causing germs, new evidence suggests that using a condom with nonoxynol-9 may not be any more effective than using a condom alone. Ask your physician for details.

If you suspect an STD

Tell your doctor immediately. Then once you have a diagnosis, inform your recent sex partners and recommend that they also be tested right away.

Remember, most STDs can be dealt with successfully, the earlier the better. But you must undergo a complete course of treatment and be tested afterward to make sure the therapy was effective.

Visit your family physician's office, local library, family planning clinic, health department office or STD program for further information. The Internet has made it easier to research this topic in the privacy of your home. So check out the Web sites listed in the Additional Information box.

Stop the silence

Finally, be open with your teenagers. The conversation may be difficult, but for the sake of good health and long life, it's worth the challenge. It's also a good way to eliminate the words "embarrassment" and "guilt" from the vocabulary about STDs.

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A quarter of new STD cases occur in teenagers.

CHECK THIS OUT

- Want more information about the do's and don'ts of condom use for preventing sexually transmitted diseases? Visit <http://www.fda.gov/oashi/aids/condom.html>.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

American Academy of Family Physicians <http://familydoctor.org>

American Academy of Dermatology
<http://www.aad.org/pamphlets/index.html>

American Social Health Association
<http://www.ashastd.org/stdfaqs/index.html>

American Urological Association
<http://www.urologyhealth.org/adult/index.cfm?cat=07&topic=176>

The National Women's Health Information Center
<http://www.4woman.gov>