

Sexually Transmitted Diseases and Women

By Ashleigh Eisbrener

Millions of Americans contract sexually transmitted diseases (STD) every year, but they still remain one of the most under-recognized health threats in the country today. STDs are infectious diseases spread from person to person through intimate contact, including sexual intercourse, oral and anal sex, and, with some STDs, even skin-to-skin contact with an infected area or sore.

STDs are often referred to as a “silent” or “hidden” epidemic in the U.S. because while they’re extremely common, they’re difficult to track. Many of these diseases don’t have symptoms and remain undiagnosed. The latest estimates indicate there are currently over 65 million people in the United States who have a STD and about 19 million new cases each year. Although it is thought STDs occur as frequently in men as in women, women suffer the greatest risk and burden.

The most serious of these diseases among women are chlamydia, gonorrhea and HPV. If left untreated, both chlamydia and gonorrhea can lead to infertility, potentially fatal tubal pregnancies and chronic pelvic pain as well as serious health problems to infants during pregnancy. HPV can lead to problems with the cervix and cervical cancer. In addition, women with STDs are more likely to be infected with HIV, if exposed.

- One in four teenagers per year will contract a STD.
- By a person’s mid-20s, one in two people their age will have a STD.
- By a person’s mid-40s, only half the people in their age group have been tested for STDs.
- About one in five Americans has genital herpes, but about 90 percent don’t know it.
- Less than one-third of physicians report routinely screening patients for STDs.

The only way to completely prevent STDs is through abstinence from all types of sexual contact. The next best way to reduce the chances of becoming infected is to always use protection. Keep in mind it’s difficult to tell whether a person has a STD or not since most don’t cause symptoms, and there is no widespread screening. You and your partner should be tested before proceeding with intimate contact. Over 20 sexually transmitted diseases exist. The most common types in America include chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, genital herpes and HPV.

Chlamydia is caused by bacteria and often has no symptoms but can damage a woman’s reproductive organs. Those who do have symptoms will experience unusual discharge or pain during urination that occurs one to three weeks after exposure and can be treated with prescription antibiotics. In 2007, 1,108,374 chlamydia infections were reported to the CDC.

Gonorrhea is caused by bacteria and can lead to fever, pain during intercourse and infertility. Symptoms appear two to seven days after exposure, and although some experience no

symptoms, others will have discolored discharge or burning when urinating. Untreated gonorrhea can affect the throat, eyes, heart, brain, skin and joints. In 2007, 355, 991 cases of gonorrhea were reported to the CDC. Gonorrhea can be treated with prescription antibiotics.

Syphilis is caused by bacteria and occurs in stages. Primary Syphilis is the first stage when sores, known as chancres, appear on the genital area. During this time, syphilis is highly contagious, and although the sores disappear after several days, the disease is still present and will worsen. If left untreated

Secondary Syphilis can occur, causing a rash and flu-like symptoms that go away, but the disease continues to progress. Latent Syphilis then occurs, when the disease is dormant. If still left untreated, Tertiary Syphilis can develop, where the disease starts spreading through the body, affecting the brain, heart, spinal cord and bones. At this stage, syphilis can lead to death. In 2007, 11,466 cases were reported to the CDC. If caught during its early stages, syphilis can be treated with medication.

Genital Herpes is caused by a virus called herpes simplex (HSV). There are two different types: HSV-1 and HSV-2. Most forms of genital herpes are HSV-2, but a person with HSV-1 (the type that causes cold sores) can transmit the virus through oral sex. Some never have an outbreak, but others experience itching or pain, followed by sores in the genital area that often heal in two to four weeks. The virus then becomes dormant, but can reactivate at any time and can be passed through intimate contact even if the infected person is not having an outbreak. Approximately 30 million Americans have the herpes virus, and there are about 500,000 new cases each year in America, according to the Herpes Clinic. There is no cure for genital herpes, but doctors can prescribe antiviral medication to help control recurring HSV-2 and clear painful sores.

HPV is a virus that causes genital warts located near or in the genital area. There are over 100 types of HPV, and more than 30 of these strands cause genital warts. Some have no signs or symptoms of the disease, but others experience warts that may grow bigger and multiply or disappear. Females should seek help immediately because HPV can cause problems with the cervix that can lead to cervical cancer. Data suggests that genital warts may be increasing, and almost six percent of sexually active 18 to 59 year olds reported a history of genital warts. There is no cure for HPV, but prescription medication, chemicals or lasers can reduce the number of warts. Since HPV lives in the skin, the warts can recur at any time.

