

Sexually Transmitted Diseases

Basic Facts about STDs

- ◆ STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) refer to a variety of bacterial, viral and parasitic infections that are acquired through sexual activity.
- ◆ Some STDs, such as syphilis and gonorrhea, have been known for centuries—while others, such as HIV, have been identified only in the past few decades.
- ◆ STDs are caused by more than 25 infectious organisms. As more organisms are identified, the number of STDs continues to expand.
- ◆ Common STDs include: chlamydia, gonorrhea, hepatitis B, herpes, HIV, HPV (human papillomavirus), syphilis and trichomoniasis.
- ◆ The U.S. has the highest STD rates of any country in the industrialized world. Despite this, there is no national campaign to promote the prevention, treatment and cure of these infections.
- ◆ Approximately 18.9 million new cases of STDs (excluding HIV) occur each year in the U.S. More than half of all people will be infected with an STD at some point in their lifetime.
- ◆ Bacterial STDs—such as gonorrhea and chlamydia—can be cured. Early treatment reduces their spread, as well as serious medical complications.
- ◆ Viral STDs—such as herpes, hepatitis B and HIV—can be effectively treated. However, at present there is no cure for viral STDs.
- ◆ Current testing and treatment technologies can stop the spread of STDs and eliminate some completely.



Women, Youth and People of Color Are Disproportionately Affected by STDs

While anyone who is sexually active is at risk for getting an STD, women, youth and people of color are more likely to become infected. They can also face more serious medical complications.

Women

- ◆ STDs are more easily passed from men to women than vice versa, which results in higher female rates of infection.
- ◆ Many STDs affecting women show no early signs or symptoms. As a result, they go undetected and untreated until complications arise.
- ◆ The consequences of untreated STDs are often more serious in women, including: infertility, tubal pregnancy, chronic pain, cervical cancer and other complications. For example, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), a preventable complication from certain STDs, occurs in more than one million women each year.
- ◆ Of all women infertile from PID, only half have ever been diagnosed and treated.
- ◆ Pregnant women with STDs are at greater risk of miscarriage and premature delivery. In some cases they can also transmit the infection to their babies.

Youth

- ◆ Each year 9 million new cases of STDs occur among young people aged 15–24. Sexually active youth have the highest STD rates of any age group in the country.
- ◆ By age 25, one-half of all sexually active young people get an STD.
- ◆ Young people are at greatest risk for STDs because, as a group, they are more likely to have unprotected sex and more than one sex partner.
- ◆ Like adults, many teenagers lack awareness of STDs. More than half of all sexually active teens have never discussed STDs with their partner or health-care provider.
- ◆ Young women, in particular, are vulnerable to STDs such as chlamydia and gonorrhea because of changes in the cervix due to puberty.



People of Color

- ◆ African Americans and Hispanics have disproportionately high poverty rates, making them less likely to have the necessary health insurance and access to medical care that can prevent and treat STDs.

- ◆ For genital herpes, the infection rate of African Americans is three times higher than that of whites. African Americans with the same number of sexual partners as whites still have a significantly higher risk of herpes infection.
- ◆ In the 15 to 19-year-old age group, rates of chlamydial infection are 50 percent higher among Mexican Americans compared to whites. Rates among African Americans in this age group are twice as high as those of white Americans.
- ◆ In 2002, rates of syphilis were 8 times higher for African Americans than for white Americans.

Stopping the Spread of STDs

- ◆ Most Americans underestimate their risk of getting an STD. According to recent survey data, only 14 percent of men and 8 percent of women think they are at risk of becoming infected.
- ◆ Because the risk is underestimated—and because many STDs are “silent” in their early stages—many people do not get tested and then inadvertently pass the infection to others.
- ◆ Lack of STD awareness is perpetuated by stigma, secrecy and shame, even between health-care providers and patients. Over half of all adults and over one-third of all teens in 1995 said that their health-care providers spent no time discussing STDs with them.
- ◆ Early screening, diagnosis, counseling and treatment can stop the spread of STDs.

Costs and Consequences of STDs

- ◆ The direct medical costs of treating STDs are over \$8.4 billion a year. The indirect costs are much higher, including lost wages and productivity, as well as human costs such as anxiety, shame, anger, depression and physical pain.
- ◆ Prevention efforts are under-funded. For every dollar spent on prevention, \$43 is spent each year on STD-related costs.

- ◆ Research efforts are also under-funded. For every dollar spent on research, \$92 is spent each year on STD-related costs.
- ◆ The health consequences of STDs include: chronic pain, infertility, cervical cancer and increased vulnerability to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.
- ◆ STDs carry great psychosocial burdens as well, including stigma and shame.
- ◆ The transmission of STDs to babies—prenatally, during birth or after—can cause serious life-long complications and even death.

Prevention and Treatment Efforts

- ◆ Screening programs are a cost-effective way to detect STDs. In addition, states that routinely screen for chlamydia report a reduction in cases as high as 66 percent.



- ◆ The leading strategies to prevent STDs are abstinence and consistent condom use. However, microbicides and vaccines, now being researched and tested, might also be able to prevent these diseases. Increased funding for such efforts is essential.
- ◆ Vaccines for herpes and HPV prevention are in clinical trials. A program of adolescent immunizations may be needed in order to implement these vaccines. This could prove controversial.
- ◆ Media coverage of STD issues that is non-stigmatizing, medically accurate and offers resources for further education can have a positive impact on overall awareness.

Public Health and Policy Issues

In its landmark report, *The Hidden Epidemic: Confronting Sexually Transmitted Diseases*, the Institute of Medicine (IOM) called for an effective national system for STD prevention “based on national policy, coordinated at all levels, and composed of local, state and national prevention programs.”

ASHA fully supports the IOM strategies, which include:

- ◆ Designing and implementing STD prevention services in innovative ways for adolescents and underserved populations.
- ◆ Ensuring access to and quality of essential clinical services for STDs.
- ◆ Improving professional skills in sexual health issues.
- ◆ Catalyzing change through open discussion and promoting awareness and balanced media messages.
- ◆ Supporting sexual health behavior research.
- ◆ Enhancing private and public sector investments in STD prevention.