



Pick Your Path to Health

Sexually Transmitted Diseases—Be Responsible for Your Own Behavior

Today, movies, television, and even newspapers don't seem to have a hard time discussing sex. But for parents, teenagers, friends, and even some health professionals, a frank discussion about sexual activity can be hard. African American women, in particular, have difficulty discussing these topics openly.

Talking about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) can be even more difficult, and it's not something many women want to hear about. But there are a few important messages. If you have sexual intercourse with someone who has had sex with other people (even just one other person), and do not use a condom, you can get a sexually transmitted disease.

The most common STDs are gonorrhea, herpes simplex, chlamydia, HIV/AIDS, syphilis, and genital warts. If left untreated, STDs can cause permanent health problems. For example, one in four infertile couples are unable to conceive because of problems resulting from STDs. Pregnant women with an STD can transmit the disease to their baby.

Who contracts STDs? Many more people than you think, regardless of race, background, or anything else. Two-thirds of all STD cases occur in individuals under age 25, and one in four teenagers contracts an STD each year. Some STD rates are higher in women. CDC reports that one in four women have the herpes virus, compared to one in five men. For both men and women the rates are astonishingly high.

"The number of people contracting STDs every year is rising," says Deborah Hernan, vice president of communications at the American Foundation for AIDS Research (amfAR). "The best way to protect yourself is to be sexually responsible and use a condom. You're not only being smart, you're taking care of yourself and your partner."

It makes sense, if you are sexually active, to be tested for STDs. If you're infected, get treated. Early diagnosis keeps the disease from infecting other parts of the reproductive system and causing too much damage. The treatment varies depending on the disease ? gonorrhea and chlamydia can be treated with antibiotics, the symptoms of herpes can be controlled with medication, and genital warts can be removed but may return.

Also, don't assume your gynecologist will automatically test you for STDs. If you have any reason to think you may have been exposed to a sexually transmitted disease, you should bring up the subject yourself.

Although there are many new drugs available to treat HIV/AIDS, the disease still causes major life-altering problems and requires long-term treatment that is complex and costly. While the annual number of AIDS-related deaths in the U.S. has dropped in recent years, this rate of decline has slowed markedly, and some regions are now reporting an increase in AIDS deaths.

How can you tell if someone has an STD? You can't. Gonorrhea and chlamydia may cause itching and an unpleasant discharge in women and painful urination in men, but other STDs may not produce any symptoms until it is too late. So, looking at your partner or thinking that "nice" people don't get diseases doesn't work. Also, another fact about several of these sneaky diseases like herpes—it can seem to go away but then reappear months or even years later.

Keep in mind ? if you are in a relationship and develop an STD, unless you and your partner are both treated, you can reinfect each other.

So, how can you avoid contracting an STD? If you have multiple partners, protect yourself and make sure your partner uses a latex rubber condom (natural skin condoms do not prevent HIV/AIDS). Remember that you can contract an STD though oral sex. If you are in a steady relationship, you should still use a condom. Many women feel that they know and trust their partner. But unless you have been in a monogamous relationship for years, and know that your partner has not been with anyone else either, it is hard to be completely sure that your partner has not been exposed to an STD. Some people may not be honest about the fact that they have an STD or may have been exposed to one.

If you have an STD, you have a responsibility to inform your partner before sex. Being responsible about sex is a good thing because you are taking care of yourself. It's a simple thing you can do to lead you down a path for a happier, healthier future.

Pick Your Path to Health is a national public health campaign sponsored by the Office on Women's Health within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For other tips on improving your health, or for more information on the Pick Your Path to Health campaign, call 1-800-994-

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