

Preventing STDs

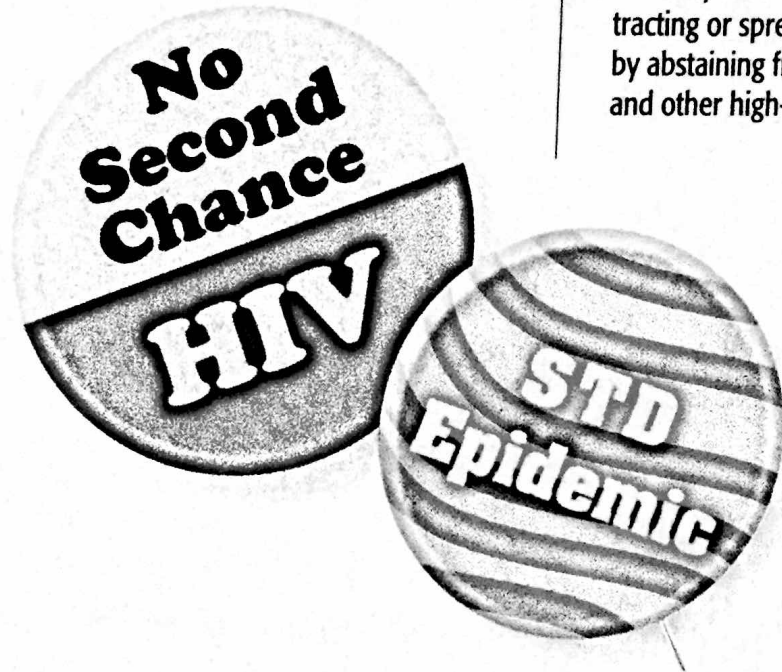
Some infectious diseases such as the flu or a virus can be transmitted through actions as simple as sharing a fork. Other infectious diseases, however, are not so easily spread. Sexually transmitted diseases, or STDs, are 100 percent avoidable. **Sexually transmitted diseases** are *infectious diseases spread from person to person through sexual contact*.

HEALTH TERMS

sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)
epidemic

HEALTH CONCEPTS

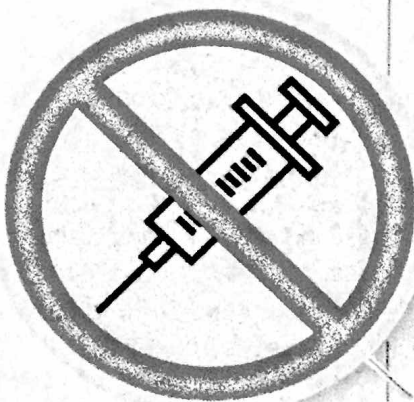
- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are spread from person to person, primarily by means of sexual contact.
- Although the rate of transmission of STDs has been steadily declining, the problem remains an epidemic in this country.
- The only sure way to avoid contracting or spreading an STD is by abstaining from sexual activity and other high-risk behaviors.



STDs: The Silent Epidemic

At the turn of the twentieth century, this country was faced with an epidemic of typhoid fever, an infectious disease caused by bacteria acquired through infected water. An **epidemic** is *an outbreak of an infectious disease that affects a large population*. With intervention on the part of health officials at the state and county level, the typhoid epidemic was wiped out.

Today our country faces another epidemic. This one is an epidemic of STDs. About 13 million new cases of STDs are reported each year in the United States. What is perhaps even more alarming is that numerous other cases go unreported. This is because STDs carry a social stigma, or mark of shame. Many people are embarrassed to talk about them, especially those who become infected. For



this reason, STDs are often referred to as the “silent” epidemic. Partly because of this silence, a number of myths and misconceptions have arisen around STDs and how they are spread.

STDs and Adolescents

One common myth surrounding STDs is that they are not a problem among teenagers, when in reality two-thirds of all STD cases occur in adolescents and young adults. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has noted that one in four sexually active teens will contract an STD before graduating from high school.

Why are teens as a group at particularly high risk for infection from STDs? One reason is that teens who are sexually active are likely to exhibit one or more of the following behaviors:

- Having more than one sexual partner rather than committing to a single, long-term relationship.
- Engaging in unprotected sex.
- Selecting partners at higher risk, such as those with a history of multiple sex partners or intravenous drug use. An additional risk for teen females is that they lack an **immunity** to some of the pathogens that cause STDs.

These risk factors are magnified by the fact that when teens do contract an STD, they are less likely than adults to seek medical attention. Some teens are simply unaware of what action to take, though in many cases the reluctance to seek help stems from a fear of disapproval by parents or other adults at home. Other teens refuse to believe that they could have an STD. Through denial and rationalization, they ignore the signs and symptoms of infection.

Partly because of this silence, a number of myths and misconceptions have arisen around STDs and how they are spread.



hot link

immunity For more information on immunity and how it protects the body from pathogens, see Chapter 28, page 631.

MORE MYTHS ABOUT STDs

MYTH You can get STDs only if you have lots of sexual partners.
FACT You can get an STD from your first sexual experience.

MYTH STDs can easily be cleared up with antibiotics.
FACT Some types of STDs are incurable and last a lifetime.

MYTH If you have an STD, you would have symptoms of the disease.
FACT In some cases, especially early in the disease, no symptoms are present.

MYTH Once the symptoms of an STD go away, the disease is cured.
FACT You can still have an STD, even if the symptoms go away.

MYTH You can have only one type of STD at a time.
FACT It is possible to have more than one kind of STD infection.

MYTH Once infected with an STD, you cannot get it again.
FACT No one can become immune to STDs. Anyone can be reinfected.

MYTH A vaccine can prevent the spread of STDs.
FACT No vaccine exists for STDs, except for hepatitis B.

MYTH Having a Pap test is one way a female can find out if she has an STD.
FACT A Pap test detects cancer cells, not the presence of an STD.

STDs and Your Future

Contracting an STD can dramatically change the course of your life. Consider:

- Some STDs can cause **sterility**, the inability to reproduce.
- Infants born to mothers with STDs can be infected at birth and suffer consequences such as blindness and deformities.
- Some STDs are incurable, meaning that the individual must live with the reoccurrence of painful genital sores for the rest of his or her life.
- Individuals with STDs are at a greater risk for cancer, and some STDs such as **AIDS** are fatal.

Being informed with facts about STDs can help you avoid behaviors that lead to infection. In the pages that follow, you will learn critical facts about STDs. For now, it is enough to be aware of the most important fact: *The primary means of transmission of STDs is sexual contact.* A person who practices abstinence from sexual activity reduces his or her risk of contracting an STD.

Practicing Abstinence

You have probably learned about cause-and-effect relationships. Touching a hot iron, for example, can be a *cause* of sustaining a burn, which is the *effect*.

A clear cause-and-effect relationship exists between sexual intercourse and sexually transmitted diseases. If you have sexual contact with an infected person, you will be at high risk of contracting an STD. Sexual activity is the cause; an STD is the effect.

Having sexual relations during the teen years can lead to other unwanted consequences as well, including an unplanned or unintentional pregnancy and the responsibility of becoming a parent. Having sexual contact can complicate relationships with family members and friends. Remaining abstinent will allow teenagers to focus more clearly on their goals for the future.

Fortunately, more and more teens are learning about the realities of STDs and practicing **abstinence**. Their actions have resulted in a decrease in the rates of STD infection over the past several years. The recent decline in the most prevalent STD of them all, chlamydia, is one example of this positive trend.