

Health

BY BELISA VRANICH

After lurking for years in relative obscurity, “classic” sexually transmitted diseases like genital herpes and chlamydia are fast becoming the first epidemic of the 21st century



STDs: Proof there's more than one way to get screwed in the bedroom.

They're Back . . .

Don't mean to scare you, but STDs are everywhere. You may have one and not even know it. (Actually, we do mean to scare you.)

You're at the urinal when something catches your eye. Something alarming. You hold your breath and take a long, long look—paralyzed. There's a bump. Down there.

Not a big bump, but one that you know wasn't there before. You look away, and then you look back—in fear—hoping you didn't see what you thought you saw.

But no, the bump actually looks bigger now. You touch it. Is it a pimple? An ingrown hair? An allergic reaction to soap? “Oh God, please—not *this!*” Your mental sex calculator goes wild. The Tuesday quickie with the neighbor? But that was just a second, and you didn't sleep together. Last month with the hottie from work? But she'd just gotten out of a long-term relationship. After happy hour with the flirty red-head? Yeah, but she looked so . . . pure.

It doesn't matter how it happened. Whatever topical ointment you apply, and to whichever patron saint you pray (swearing you'll never let Jimmy out to

FROM LEFT: DEBORAH JAFFE/GETTY IMAGES; RYAN McVAY/GETTY IMAGES

play again), the bottom line is you're now a member of Club Herpes, where you can check in but never check out.

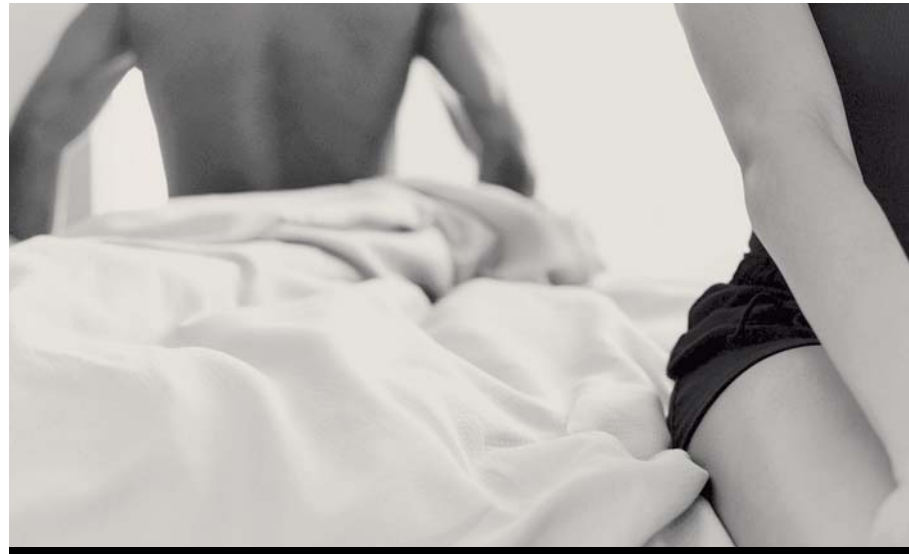
According to the American Social Health Association, at least one of every four Americans will contract an STD (other than HIV) at some point in their lives—more people than at any other time in the past. How bad is the problem? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has gone so far as to label the spread of STDs an epidemic. U.S. gonorrhea rates are the highest in the industrial world, up nearly 10% in the last decade, after a 72% drop between 1975 and 1997. And after hitting an all-time low in 2000, syphilis rates are also on the rise for the second consecutive year.

Perhaps most shocking of all, in the era of safer sex, is how herpes infections have increased by more than 30% since the '70s. At the same time, a startling one in three college-age women are infected with the human papilloma virus (HPV), while the National Institutes of Health estimates that 60 million Americans have genital herpes, and another 500,000 people will become infected each year (80% of those aren't even aware of it). And then there's chlamydia, the most widespread of all STDs in the U.S. Chlamydia rates have soared by 37% in the past five years.

DO THE NUMBERS LIE?

Many men suspect that STD rates are exaggerated—inflated by government agencies clawing for research dollars. But Toby Anderson, a social worker

Anderson is right to worry. Consider: A 2002 report in the journal *Sexually Transmitted Diseases* says that nearly 50% of all women and 40% of men could suffer from genital herpes by the year 2025. For those of you not so good at math, that means half the chicks you know. And the projected transmission rates for other STDs are equally alarming.



SAFE SEX: Be cautious not celibate.

WHAT'S BEHIND THE SPREAD?

Unsafe sex is the biggest factor. In a 2004 report, the *American Journal of Health Behavior* revealed that many men would rather catch an STD and have it treated than deal with the “hassle” of condoms. And even condom users are having more sex than ever before, and doing it at a younger age—increasing their total number of partners and their STD risk.

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in Manhattan, knows otherwise. She handles STD test results on a daily basis. “Sure, the stats are higher than what we know,” she says. “Those are only the documented numbers. Real statistics for diseases with a stigma attached to them, like STDs, are far higher than what have been published. What's frightening to me is the exponential rate at which they are rising.”

Research conducted by the CDC show that 65% of high schoolers have had sex by 12th grade, and 20% have had more than four partners. People are also getting married later, which allows them to have more partners. But perhaps the most significant factor is that many of the infected have no symptoms, so they're passing infections on and don't even know it.

The good news? (Yes, there is some.) Most STDs are manageable if caught and treated in time. Some, like gonorrhea and chlamydia, can be cured, while others, like genital warts, can be treated—though you'll live with the virus forever.

That's why for many men, dealing with the ramifications of an STD can be

A Letter to the Past

What goes around comes around

“Jessica was one of those girls who just looked squeaky clean. Straight blond hair and skin so plastic-pink you'd think she just popped out of the box. When she told me she had an STD, it was like she'd kneed me in the groin. It was like she was telling me she was a man or that she had decided to leave me for another chick. (That might have been OK, come to think of it.) I was out of that relationship like a fat kid in dodge ball. Two years later, I came up positive for an STD. When I started reading up on the subject, I finally realized what a jerk I'd been. Jessica, if you are out there and are reading this, please forgive me for being a callous ass.”

—Michael, 32, Los Angeles

Health



THE H WORD: "Baby, I've got something to tell you . . ."

just as difficult as getting past the condition itself. "For those who get a clean bill of health, getting tested can be a terrific relief," says Lorna Myers, a New York psychologist. "For those who don't, there is an enormous sense of shame."

Frank Montalvo, 28, heard the news that he had gonorrhea last year. "I was totally caught off guard. I didn't expect it at all," he recalls. "I got lucky—my girlfriend didn't flip out. Her best friend had already had it, so she'd read up. I felt so grossed out.

It was a relief that I just had to take antibiotics for a few days."

HOW TO STAY SAFE

First, skip the vows of celibacy. You don't need to be a monk to avoid STDs. Instead, visit the doctor and get checked out and, if necessary, treated. Remember, doctors do this stuff all day, so while the visit is embarrassing to you, for them it's just business as usual. "The whole procedure is usually pretty simple," says Jack Bruder, M.D., a urologist at St. Vincent's

Test Your STD Knowledge

True or False . . .

You can get an STD from foreplay.

True. You don't have to have penetration to catch an STD like herpes or genital warts. Simple contact is all it takes.

When you're in a relationship, only the person with symptoms needs to see a doctor—not both partners.

False. Even if the other person doesn't have symptoms, it's very likely both members of the couple are infected. If only one person is tested and treated, the other can pass the infection back. And so on and so on . . .

If you go to the doctor, they'll stick a foot-long Q-tip in your Johnson.

False. The chances of a doc swabbing your urethra are slight. Most doctors now have the option to use urine samples for all STD testing. Ask your doctor what options are available, and stop trying to make excuses.

Stress makes STDs worse.

True. Stress weakens your immune system, which can increase your risk of a herpes outbreak or STD infection.

The younger you are, the greater your risk for catching an STD.

True. Studies show that at least half of all the new HIV and STD infections occur in people under the age of 25.

How to Break the News

Even if you're using a condom, you have to tell her. Why? STDs can be passed through skin-to-skin contact, oral/genital contact, and sharing of, well . . . toys. So if you're going to play, it's only right that you play fair.

1. Don't tell her until it's pretty clear in your mating dance that you are going to be intimate: somewhere between second and third base, or dessert and total nudity. Start by saying that you are not assuming that she is going to have sex with you, but just in case . . .

2. Your tone should be serious without seeming morose; diplomatic and attentive. Be straightforward. Tell her when you were diagnosed, that you were treated or are taking medication (for diseases like herpes that don't go away), and that you are very interested in using protection. Give her a moment to take it all in. Given the statistics, chances are she or a friend of hers has probably had an experience with an STD before. Give her a chance to ask questions. Then thank her for being understanding.

3. What happens if she freaks out? Well, it might happen. Who knows what her experience has been in the past? However, she probably won't completely lose it if you are calm, sincere, and you listen to her concerns. Assure her you will do anything she asks so that she'll feel comfortable with the situation. Given that STDs in women can cause serious complications like cervical cancer, infertility, and pelvic inflammatory disease, she has every right to be concerned.

Hospital in Manhattan. “Depending on the patient, it takes about 20 minutes.”

The key areas to cover? Make sure you get a blood and urine screening, along with a complete physical exam. (In doctor lingo, that’s a complete urinalysis along with a comprehensive metabolic panel and an STD panel.) Avoid peeing for at least two hours beforehand and the doc won’t even have to whip out those scary swabs you’ve heard so much about.

And that’s it. A couple of questions about your rig, a quick analysis of your family history, and then you urinate into a cup and give some blood. No painful prodding, no testicular torture, no nurses asking humiliating questions. If everything checks out—and you continue to keep things safe (note to self: cancel trip to Thailand with frat brothers)—you could be the only guy on your block without an STD. Then the only thing you have to sweat is staying that way.

Belisa Vranich is a freelance writer and New York-based clinical psychologist.

Sex Talk With the Condom King

An interview with Adam Glickman, CEO of condomania.com, the one-stop condom shop



WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON MISTAKES GUYS MAKE WITH CONDOMS?

Don’t carry them in your wallet or back pocket. Heat and pressure are natural enemies of latex, and keep them away from oil-based products like Vaseline, baby oil, suntan oil, Crisco, and massage oil. They all eat through latex like acid.

WHAT’S THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN PICKING A CONDOM?

The fit. If it’s too loose, you risk slippage and leakage. Too tight, and you increase the risk of breakage. If you have problems finding the right size, look for a brand called They-Fit. It’s a custom line with 55 different sizes based on length and width—sort of like bra-sizing for women.

DOES ANYONE REALLY “DOUBLE BAG” IT?

Yes, and we’re firmly against it. Doubling up—one condom over another—increases the risk that your condom will break because of the extra latex-on-latex friction. One good condom is all you need. Well, maybe two. One now, and one for later.

FROM LEFT: DIGITAL VISION/GETTY IMAGES; R. KNOBLOCH/ZEFA

Disease	Number of Americans Affected	Symptoms of Infection	Worst-Case Scenario if Left Untreated	How Long It Takes to Appear	Can It Be Cured?	Treatment Options
Herpes Culprit: herpes simplex virus	45–60 million, with 500,000 new cases a year	Clear, painful blisters; sores; fever; itching or burning; discharge and pain while urinating	Large open sores and, in rare cases, spinal problems and swelling of the brain	2 to 10 days	No	Topical creams and antiviral medications
HPV (genital or venereal warts) Culprit: human papilloma virus	20 million, with 5.5 million new cases a year	Cauliflower-shaped growths or clusters around the anus, penis, groin, or scrotal area	Increased risk for oral, genital, and anal cancer	Up to 3 months	No	Prescription creams or removal with acid, lasers, or liquid nitrogen
Gonorrhea Culprit: <i>Neisseria gonorrhoeae</i>	650,000 new cases a year	Pain while urinating or a yellowish puslike discharge	Infection of the joints, heart valves, and brain	2 to 10 days	Yes	Antibiotics
Chlamydia Culprit: <i>Chlamydia trachomatis</i>	Up to 8 million new cases a year	Clear, watery discharge; mild to painful burning during urination	Throat infections; inflamed rectum; painful swelling of the testicles	1 to 3 weeks	Yes	Antibiotics
Syphilis Culprit: <i>Treponema pal-</i>	70,000 new cases a year	Rash; patches of flaking tissue; fever or sore throat	Heart and nerve damage and possible blindness	Up to a year	Yes	Penicillin or antibiotics