

Teens, young adults bear disproportionate share of STDs

28 April 2013, by Gracie Bonds Staples

In the heat of the moment, it's a good bet sexually transmitted infections are the last thing on a teen's or young adult's mind. Thus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, young people ages 15-24, who make up just more than one-quarter of the sexually active population, account for half of the 20 million new sexually transmitted infections that occur in the U.S. each year.

With this being Sexually Transmitted Disease Awareness Month, officials are emphasizing efforts to educate teens and their parents about the public health issue to slow the spread of diseases among [young people](#).

In addition to providing testing, some localities are leveraging social media to help inform the public about treatments, [prevention strategies](#) and the need to get tested.

"It is a sobering reality that so many young people are infected with STDs and even more startling, the number of these young people who aren't even aware of it," said Dr. Patrick O'Neal, director of [health protection](#) at the Georgia Department of Public Health. "Our goal is to reduce incidence of STDs and the disparity in numbers of young people infected, and cutting down [sexual transmission](#) of STDs."

While sexually transmitted infections affect people of all ages, they take a particularly heavy physical toll on young people, said Dr. Gail Bolan, director of the CDC's Division of STD Prevention.

This is true especially for young women going through puberty because [biological factors](#) make it easier for organisms to enter their reproductive systems.

Although most women will clear infection with medical treatment, some are left with debilitating [pelvic pain](#) and are at increased risk of developing

ectopic pregnancies.

Among the eight common sexually transmitted infections, she said, the [human papillomavirus](#), or HPV, is by far the most common among teens and [young adults](#).

Though most [HPV infections](#) will clear on their own, some will take hold and can lead to serious disease, including cervical cancer.

Chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes and trichomoniasis are also common among the young age group.

Undiagnosed infections cause 24,000 women to become infertile each year, according to the CDC.

"I think we've known for a long time that young people are at greater risk for sexually transmitted disease and the prevalence of infection among them is very high," Bolan said. "The way we reduce infection is by identifying people as quickly as possible so that they can get treated." Bolan said her office is partnering with other public health agencies to raise awareness not only about the impact of infections, but the causes and what teens and young adults can do to protect themselves.

A lack of access to health care, confidentiality concerns, even being too embarrassed to tell anyone, all feed the spread of infections, she said.

Bolan said sexually active teens and young adults should be checked periodically for disease. If they suspect they've been infected, they should seek care from their pediatrician or primary care doctor. If they don't know where to go, they can call their local health department.

STDS BY THE NUMBERS (U.S. FIGURES)

1 million diagnosed and reported chlamydia cases in 2011

200,000 diagnosed and reported gonorrhea cases in 2011

4,700 diagnosed and reported syphilis cases in 2011

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SCREENING RECOMMENDATIONS:

-Annual chlamydia screening for all sexually active women age 25 and younger.

-Yearly gonorrhea screening for at-risk sexually active women with new or multiple sex partners and women who live in communities with a high incidence of disease.

-Syphilis, chlamydia and hepatitis B screening for all pregnant women, and gonorrhea screening for at-risk pregnant women at the first prenatal visit to protect the health of mothers and their infants.

-Screening at least once a year for syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhea and HIV for all sexually active men who have sex with men. Those who use illicit drugs or whose sex partners participate in these activities should be screened more frequently.

-For information, log onto www.cdc.gov/std

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