

Extra Feature Story

One in Four American Teenage Girls Has Sexually-Transmitted Infection

May 22, 2008

A recent study of girls ages 14-19 showed that a large number had one of the four most commonly transmitted infections: chlamydia, trichomoniasis, genital herpes, and HPV—human papillomavirus.

In the study, led by Dr. Sara Forhan of the Centers for Disease Control, girls were medically examined and given private, computerized questionnaires to discuss their sexual experiences.

The results indicated that 26 percent of all teenage girls tested positive for at least one of the four sexually transmitted infections (STIs), while 40 percent of sexually active teen girls had at least one STI.

These percentages estimate that 3.2 million teenage girls in the country are currently afflicted with one or more of the most common STIs. Nearly half of all 14-19 year old girls said they were sexually active.

Greater consequences for girls than boys

Teenage boys were not included in the study because methods have only recently become available to test young men for the same infections, said Dr. Forhan. "It would be nice to have information on all adolescents, not just young women, she said. "[But] The potential consequences of these sexually transmitted infections are greater for women than for men, including cervical cancer and infertility."

The most commonly diagnosed infection was HPV, a virus which can cause cervical cancer in women, followed by chlamydia, a bacteria which can cause pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility. Trichomoniasis and genital herpes, though less common in the results, both increase susceptibility to HIV.

Transmission and infection

"These numbers do not surprise me," said Dr. Margaret Blythe, an adolescent medicine specialist at Indiana University School of Medicine. She notes that many teenagers mistakenly believe they are uninfected because some infections do not present noticeable symptoms. "These infections are asymptomatic—unless you get tested for the common ones you won't know whether you have it or not," she said.

STIs can be transmitted through any kind of sexual intercourse—as well as the exchange of body fluids and skin-to-skin touching of the genital areas.

STIs also spread easily, American Academy of Pediatrics Fellow Dr. Charles Wibbelsman says, because many teens unknowingly pass along the infection. "A lot of young people truly believe unless they've had vaginal intercourse, they're still a virgin. Having oral sex or anal intercourse; they don't consider that sex," he said. "Anyone who's engaging in any type of activity with another person should be tested routinely."

A key discovery of the study, Dr. Forhan says, was the indication that teens who have had only one sexual encounter are just as likely to have an STI as those who have been more active—having had sex for a year or less.

"I think that traditional beliefs of who's at risk really need to be re-thought," Dr. Forhan said. "Just because you don't have a lot of partners and just because you've only been sexually active a short time doesn't mean you're not at risk for having an STI."

Take charge of your health

Today, it is increasingly important for all teens, Dr. Blythe says, to take charge of their own sexual health.

"Many minors do not know they have the right to be screened, i.e. tested and treated for an STI, in every state in this country, without parental consent," she said, noting that in some states teens as young as 12 can be confidentially examined, and that teens 14 and older do not require consent in any state.

Some insurance plans, however, require co-payments or insurance information that may alert parents that a screening exam has occurred, even though the results are not released.

Accordingly, Dr. Lesley Breech and Dr. Jill Huppert, specialists in pediatric and adolescent gynecology at the Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, recommend that teens, parents and doctors maintain an open dialogue about sex whenever possible to avoid the stigma and fear of getting tested.

"[This study is] a great opportunity to open the conversation to everyone," Dr. Breech said. "It's given me as a provider some opportunity to bring the [sexual health] conversation into interactions where it would have been uncomfortable and maybe even threatening to some families."

Easier tests

"When you make testing and screening routine, you take the stigma away," added Dr. Huppert.

Testing and treatment for the infections analyzed in the study have advanced significantly in recent years. Chlamydia diagnoses can now be made without internal examination by testing urine samples, while herpes can be diagnosed with blood tests. A recent HPV vaccine, now widely recommended for young women, prevents two types of HPV that cause 70 percent of cervical cancer and almost all genital warts, Dr. Forhan notes.

"Most of these infections are simply infections and if treated in a timely fashion, if possible, then long term [effects] can be avoided," Dr. Forhan said. "We're trying to avoid the long-term consequences and that's our ultimate, ultimate goal."

-- Compiled by Joe Horton for NewsHour Extra

© 2008 MacNeil/Lehrer Productions