Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are more prevalent than you may think, with millions of new infections each year in the U.S. We realize you may feel uncomfortable reading this article if you are working right now. But our commitment to health and wellness education makes it very important to pass along startling information for STD Awareness Week (April 12-18, 2020).

There are nearly two dozen infections, but the good news is they are preventable, treatable and most are also curable. Also known as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), there are common misconceptions about these conditions. For instance, some STIs are contracted through many physically intimate activities, not just through intercourse alone. And those infections which are asymptomatic or only show mild symptoms are easy to pass to partners without knowing it.¹ Some diseases are not transmitted during sex, but affect the sex organs as a result of it, such as urinary tract infections (UTIs). These are referred to as sexually associated diseases.²

STDs are on the rise. The CDC reports the following cases:

- **Gonorrhea**
  - Increased 63% since 2014.

- **Chlamydia**
  - Cases among newborns increased 185% since 2014.

- **Syphilis**
  - Infection involving nervous system.

In support of the CDC’s efforts through the Division of STD Prevention, we’re providing an overview of the most common infections (the info that some people might be hesitant to show in their search history) with strategies on communicating information with your teens, partners and physicians.

**Sexually Transmitted (and Associated) Diseases**

**Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)**

Any woman can get bacterial vaginosis, but it is associated with new or multiple partners. Symptoms include burning, itching, discharge and odor. BV is treated with antibiotics, but can increase a woman’s risk of HIV, pelvic inflammatory disease and pre-term birth.

**Chancroid**

A major risk factor for HIV, chancroid is not commonly seen in the United States. Early signs resemble syphilis, but the prevalent sores are generally larger and more painful. Infections may lead to inflammation of lymph nodes and are treated with antibiotics.

**Chlamydia**

The most common, easily curable STD, chlamydia can make it difficult for a woman to get pregnant if left untreated. Symptoms include pain during sex and discharge, but is largely asymptomatic. Signs may not appear for weeks, months or even years, if at all. Latex condoms are effective for prevention.
Gonorrhea
Otherwise known as “the clap,” gonorrhea is a common bacterial STD similar to chlamydia. Symptoms include burning during urination and, in men, discharge, although the infection can be asymptomatic. Gonorrhea, which can cause very serious complications when not treated, can be cured with the right medication. Due to its growing number of cases over time, the infection is becoming antibiotic-resistant.

Hepatitis B & C
Hepatitis is the leading cause of liver damage, including cirrhosis and cancer, and the most common reason for liver transplantation. In 1981, a vaccine was introduced to prevent infection of hepatitis B.

Herpes
Another common, but often asymptomatic infection that lies dormant is the genital herpes virus. Sores can be treated with antiviral drugs, but is not curable. The virus can be transmitted while dormant through skin-to-skin contact, thus condoms are helpful, but not entirely effective.

HIV/AIDS
People who have STDs are more likely to get HIV, the virus associated with AIDS, when compared to people who do not have STDs. Transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids, HIV is incurable, but treatable with drug regimens to the point of being undetectable in the body.

Human Papillomavirus (HPV)
The most common STI in the U.S., the four HPV strains can now be prevented with a [controversial] vaccine given in adolescence. HPV is asymptomatic, lies dormant and is incurable, but treatable. The virus is linked to cancers and genital warts.

Mycoplasma Genitalium (MG)
This very common, but less-known, STD in adolescents is starting to emerge as a major cause of cervicitis in women and nongonococcal urethritis in men, similar to gonorrhea and chlamydia. MG is associated with pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility and is often asymptomatic. There is no diagnostic test recommended by the FDA in the U.S. just yet.

Pubic Lice
A.K.A. “crabs,” pubic lice are parasites that live in warm, coarse-haired areas of the body. Lice can be treated with over-the-counter (OTC) or prescription topical drugs. They are different insects than those seen in head lice.

Scabies
While not only transmitted through sexual contact, this extremely contagious skin disease is caused by a parasite that can live for days off the human body. It can be contracted by shared clothes, towels and bedding. An extremely itchy rash affects those infected, worsening at night.

Syphilis
Simple to cure with penicillin or other antibiotics, syphilis is a common STD caused by bacteria. If left untreated, it can cause serious complications with the brain and other organs. Symptoms include small,
painless sores (chancres) and can lie dormant in the body.

**Trichomoniasis**
This parasite commonly known as “trich” is more common in women than men and is often mistaken for a yeast infection or bacterial vaginosis due to similar symptoms of discharge, odor, pain, irritation and itching. It is typically asymptomatic in men.

Get the CDC’s STD Fact Sheets here.

**STDs and Fertility/Pregnancy**
Some of these infectious diseases can complicate pregnancy and even interfere with fertility. It is important that you share information on an STD with your OB-GYN and/or get tested for better health outcomes for your baby and yourself. Many can be treated during pregnancy and some will need to be monitored during pregnancy and labor. Read the CDC Fact Sheet on STDs during pregnancy.

To mitigate pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and infertility risk, it is recommended that sexually active women under 25, those with multiple partners or a partner who has an STI get annual screenings for chlamydia and gonorrhea. If left untreated, 10-15% of women with chlamydia will develop PID or other fallopian tube infections that can cause permanent damage. What is most concerning is that most women with chlamydia or gonorrhea have no symptoms and could be unaware of their lasting consequences.

**STD Prevention**
You might be thinking, I’m never having sex again! But consider this: most sexually transmitted infections are preventable and treatable, with a bit of wisdom behind you.

A range of unique factors place youths at risk for infection. Many young women don’t receive the chlamydia screening that the CDC recommends. They may be reluctant to disclose risky behaviors to doctors. Female bodies are biologically more susceptible to sexually transmitted infections. Additionally, younger males and females may lack insurance or transportation to access prevention services. And many young people have multiple partners, which increases STI risk.

**Why Youths Are at Risk**

Communication...
... with your partner.
Since not all STDs show symptoms, it is important to tell your partner, or in some case past partners of your diagnosis so they can get tested. While this is an uncomfortable conversation to have, even for adults, it is likely humiliating for your teen to break the news to their partner. Here are communication tips.

... with your teen.
It may be equally humiliating for parents to discuss STDs with their teens. Many school districts incorporate such lessons into health classes, but it is important for parents to keep the lines of communication open with their kids for added data and emphasis on the risks. This information from the CDC can help. Get the Teen Info Sheet.
...with your healthcare provider.
By talking to a physician about what to do—and how to work together—patients can be proactive in safeguarding their sexual health. Here are some ways patients can stand up for themselves and their health in and out of the exam room:

- Prepare to honestly answer provider’s questions.
- Get tested—many STDs are curable, and all are treatable. Getting tested is the only way to know for sure if you have an STD.
- Get treated—prevent long-term, irreversible damage by starting treatment immediately.
- Know the benefits of expedited partner therapy (EPT) in which a provider may be able to give medicines or a prescription to partners of someone with an STD without seeing them first.
- Get retested—STDs can occur more than once, so getting retested in 3 months is important, even if you and your partner took medicine.

Visit HealthDiscovery.org for related topics.

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1 CDC, “Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)”
2 Verywell Health, “The Most Common Sexually Transmitted Diseases”
3 Ibid
4 CDC, “Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs)”