

Take Charge Of Your Health Today. Be Informed. Be Involved.

This month's Take Charge of Your Health topic is about the awareness of STIs (also known as sexually transmitted infections). This topic is often taboo, but sexual health, much like mental health, must be understood if we are to be advocates for our own health. You might be wondering why we're calling them "sexually transmitted infections" instead of "sexually transmitted diseases." Experts explain that identifying these health issues as infections is more accurate because it's the infection that starts first; when an infection is left untreated, it may progress to a disease. Knowledge is power, and when it comes to your health, being informed can only lead to better outcomes.

No one can ignore history when discussing STIs. As we have mentioned many times

STI Awareness

in our articles, the U.S. Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee was an abuse of the African American men in the study. The study was designed to observe what untreated syphilis does to the body. Although the men were told they were receiving treatment, they were not, even though penicillin was available and widely used at the time. The men were never informed of the true intent of the study and never consented to be left untreated for the infection. The men suffered, and some unknowingly passed the STI to other people.

When discussing infections and diseases, we must not forget history. But it's important

to realize how far we have come in treating and preventing STIs/STDs.

Now, rigorous safeguards have been put in place to prevent unethical practices in research studies, allowing everyone to receive appropriate treatment. These protections have helped improve the Black community's trust of biomedical research. This trust has encouraged more people of color to participate in research studies.

Education plays a huge role in lowering STI rates, especially with our youths. Young men and women without educational resources often struggle with the issues regarding sexually transmitted

infections. Honest discussions about sexuality, STIs and preventions between young people and trusted adults can offset these disadvantages. Though such conversations can be uncomfortable at any age, teaching our youths will increase the likelihood of them having healthier futures.

Sharing information about healthy sexuality helps strengthen the health of our community. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, action items like abstinence, vaccination and using condoms are proven and effective ways to protect yourself and your partner. You do not have to be alone in searching for prevention education. Reliable resources like the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh's Health Education office are able to share information and guide people in the



ESTHER L. BUSH

right direction. By learning more about STIs, you can take charge of your health.

Esther L. Bush, President and CEO
Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh

Preventing the spread of STIs in young adults

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, rates of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) reached an all-time high in 2018 among both females and males and all racial and ethnic groups (data about people who are nonbinary were not available). With the release of the first-ever STI National Strategic Plan in late 2020, the United States began a path toward preventing the spread of STIs and effectively treating them.

STIs are a significant public health concern. Left untreated, STIs can spread to greater numbers of people and can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, poor birth outcomes and an increased risk of getting HIV and certain cancers. People with STIs can experience stigma and discrimination, which can diminish their quality of life.

The number of diagnosed STIs has been rapidly rising in recent years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that the number of combined cases of gonorrhea, syphilis and chlamydia was more than



ASHLEY HILL, DRPH, MPH

2.4 million in 2018 and that half of these STIs are among youths. Adolescents and young adults, men who have sex with men and pregnant women are disproportionately affected by STIs. Black, American Indian/Alaska Native and Hispanic/Latinx communities also carry a greater burden of STIs.

Ashley Hill, DrPH, MPH, assistant professor of epidemiology at the University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public Health, studies the determinants of STIs in people ages 15-24 and how to best support this population.

"I focus on this population because they carry a significant burden of STIs in the United States and also in Allegheny County," says Dr. Hill. "Nationally and locally, that age group composes about 50% of all STIs each year. All STIs are preventable and most are treatable and can be caught early."

Dr. Hill has examined the causes of young people's greater risk for STIs and found that there

tegrating young people's wants, needs and desires into the programs we're pushing for," she says. "We want to know what works for them, what their concerns are, what adults in their lives can do to support them and how to help them be heard. We want to help provide actionable change that improves their lives."

Currently, Dr. Hill and colleagues are also looking at the effects of sexual violence on STIs through research on Black women's experiences of sexual misconduct at the University of Pittsburgh. They're seeking to understand barriers to reporting such incidences and how Pitt can best support people who have had these experiences. The study—Black Women in Academia (BWA): Supporting Healing and Empowering—has implications for STIs because, if someone has experienced sexual misconduct or violence, that person could be at risk for an STI.

Though more research is necessary, Dr. Hill says that STI

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are different factors that influence their sexual and reproductive health and their ability to make safe decisions and adopt healthy practices. Some of those factors include the inability to access health care or insurance, condoms or confidential screening for STIs. Structural racism in past and current health care settings and its effects on health care use and access are also factors. Unequal power dynamics or intimate partner violence can take away people's autonomy when making decisions about their bodies, sexual health or reproductive choices. Also, in the United States as a whole, Dr. Hill points out that some people experience shame and have difficulty discussing healthy sexuality and relationships, which can lead to young people having fewer opportunities to make informed decisions.

"We need to push information more with young people," says Dr. Hill. "We need to use information that is correct, culturally appropriate and that makes sense for the age group. We also need to introduce topics like healthy sexuality and relationships at an earlier age in the greater context of overall health and well-being."

A vital part of providing more information to young people about STIs, sexual health and reproduction is asking them how they would like to be supported.

"We need to move toward in-

spread has continued through the COVID-19 pandemic. Because many people were not able to keep regular wellness appointments and have fallen away from getting routine exams, the concern is that there are even more undiagnosed and untreated STIs. During the pandemic, most young people have been out of school for months and lost various touchpoints, whether those are school or other social support services. Dr. Hill says health care providers' offices have instituted COVID-19 prevention practices, and she encourages people to keep health and wellness appointments.

Dr. Hill says that a broader goal is to put in place mechanisms to support reproductive-age people to have healthy relationships and to engage in sex in a way that makes sense for them but also is not contributing to infection, disease or adverse effects on well-being overall.

The Allegheny County Health Department provides confidential screening services and treatment for STIs at its clinic. For more information, please visit <https://www.alleghenycounty.us/Health-Department/Health-Services/STD-and-HIV-AIDS-Program/index.aspx>.

For more information about the BWA study, email bwa@pitt.edu.

Chart courtesy of Allegheny County Health Department's Public Health clinic.

STDs: A guide for staying STD-free

Here are some possible signs of a several common STDs.

But, remember that people often have no symptoms—or they are very mild. Even so, the STD can still be harming that person and spreading.

STD	When signs start	Possible signs
Chlamydia	About 1-3 weeks after infection	-Burning when urinating, pain during sex -Discharge from genitals -Bleeding between periods -If left untreated, could cause more serious conditions, such as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and infertility.
Gonorrhea	Within about 3 days or more after infection	-Discharge from genitals or anus -Painful urination -Bleeding between periods, painful or swollen testicles -If left untreated, could cause more serious conditions, such as pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and infertility.
HIV	Varies	-Flu-like symptoms can occur early on, including swollen glands, tiredness, weight loss, and night sweats. -If left untreated, coinfections can occur, such as pneumonia and meningitis, and will lead to AIDS.
Syphilis	Varies	-First stage: round painless sores on or near genitals, anus, or mouth -Second stage: a rash, often on hands and/or feet, alopecia -At any stage, one can develop problems with vision, coordination, and confusion
Genital Herpes	Within 2-12 days after exposure	-1 or more painful blisters or other sores on or around genitals or anus -Testing can only be done with an active sore or infection -Oral herpes can be spread from the mouth to the genitals through oral sex
HPV (human papillomavirus)	Within weeks or months after infection	-Genital warts: soft, moist swelling in or around genital area that may vary in size, is pink, and sometimes cauliflower shaped. -Oral or throat cancer, anal and/or cervical cancer. -There is no penile STD test for HPV, and can be spread even with the use of condoms -There is a vaccination to prevent certain strains of HPV.
Trichomoniasis	Within about 1 month after infection	-Discharge from genitals -Vaginal odor, itching, or irritation -Pain during sex or after urination
Hepatitis A, B, and C	Varies	-Hepatitis is caused by a virus that leads to inflammation of the liver. Symptoms of an infection can include tiredness, loss of appetite, nausea or abdominal pain, dark urine or clay-colored feces, yellowing of skin and whites of eyes, and joint pain. *Please note that Hepatitis is not an STD but can be transmitted sexually.

Anyone can get an STD or STI (sexually transmitted disease, or infection)

- STDs can be spread during vaginal, anal or oral sex. Additionally, some STDs can spread by contact with infected sores, skin-to-skin contact, or sharing needles (for injections, tattoos, body piercings, etc.).
- If left untreated, STDs can cause serious health problems. Some of these problems include pain, sterility, cancer, harm to a baby during pregnancy—even death.
- Having one STD can make it easier to get HIV.