

Preventing Sexually Transmitted Diseases

As I contemplated topics for the column this week, I considered writing about the prevention of HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases and nearly abandoned the idea. While I routinely discuss these topics with my interested patients, the thought of writing about them in the newspaper made me a bit uncomfortable. I thought some readers might be uneasy about the subject, or upset to see it in a public forum. But if so, that's exactly why it needs to be here. These are topics we need to be discussing.

The rate of sexually transmitted disease, including genital herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, are on the rise among young people in the US. Screening programs have particularly demonstrated alarmingly high rates of chlamydia infection among young women. While these infections are hazardous in their own right, contributing to infertility, ectopic pregnancies, and pelvic inflammatory disease, they are even more worrisome if one considers the full implications. Virtually all genital infections, or sexually transmitted diseases (STD's), increase the susceptibility to HIV by a variety of mechanisms. In addition, if one acquires any STD, one is at risk for any other. The same sexual practices that place one at risk for chlamydia place one at risk for HIV.

High rates of STD's among adolescents and young adults, therefore, indicate a high rate of vulnerability to HIV infection. This threat requires that we all overcome any discomfort we have with the topic, and

talk about it. Young people need to inform themselves about means of practicing safe sex, and they need to talk to one another about it. Parents need to talk to their kids.

Obviously, the safest approach to sex, and the most reliable means of preventing STD's, is abstinence. For many young people, however, this is not a realistic option given our societal norms for sexual behavior. Parents should not assume that their adolescent children are abstinent; they should ask. And if the adolescent honestly admits to sexual activity, a more productive discussion will ensue if the parent can resist any urge to be judgmental. Adolescents, like the rest of us, respond favorably to advice that seems to put their interests and needs first.

Parents, expressing a preference that their adolescent children refrain from sexual activity (if that is the preference) must nonetheless be prepared to say, "But if you are having sex..." In this situation, condom use is the most effective protection. Only latex condoms reliably protect against STD's, and only if used appropriately. This is the kind of discussion a parent might not want to have with their child, but should. After all, lives may be at stake. Of note, condom distribution at High Schools has been shown to increase the rates of condom use among sexually active students, but to decrease the overall rate of sexual activity as a result of the educational messages that come with the condoms. Talking to adolescents



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about sex may be sufficient to convince some to wait a bit longer.

Other means of preventing STD's include limiting the number of sexual partners one has; avoiding any sexual relationships with partners one does not know well; and avoiding the use of inebriants such as alcohol that impair judgement.

In little over a decade, the AIDS epidemic has transformed our view of infectious disease, and taught us all a uniquely new fear. Equally startling is the fact that this disease is completely preventable by means available to us today. We need no new vaccine to prevent HIV transmission. The virus does not spread through air or water, but only through intimate contact. With appropriate behavior change, the transmission of HIV, and most other STD's, need never occur. The first step in changing behaviors is changing perceptions. While parents are apt to feel their advice may go unheeded by rebellious adolescents, the research evidence suggest otherwise. Obviously, the leverage we have with our kids depends on the quality of relationships we have built over the years. But it's never too late to offer good advice. Let your kids know that while you have opinions, you are willing to listen to theirs. Let them know your preferences, but be prepared to disagree. But insist on their agreement where safe sexual practices are concerned. With good, non-judgmental advice from concerned parents, the spread of HIV and

other sexually transmitted diseases can be stopped, one case at a time.

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Preventive Medicine Column

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