

Sex-related risks judged more harshly than comparable health hazards

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People with sexually transmitted infections are often irrationally stigmatized by the public, who overestimate the risk for STIs when compared to other health risks, according to a new University of Michigan study.

Individuals who feel stigmatized often make riskier decisions, which can affect potential sexual partners, says Terri Conley, U-M associate professor of psychology and women's studies.

"Stigmatizing behaviors does not prevent unhealthy activities from occurring," she said. "When STIs are stigmatized, it prevents [people](#) who suspect they have STIs from getting tested or informing their partners about the possibility of disease exposure."

One interesting finding is that a person who unknowingly transmits chlamydia and causes a partner to have to take antibiotics is perceived more negatively than someone who transmits the H1N1 flu that results in a person's death.

Understanding the stigma is critical in health contexts, Conley said.

Using a series of studies, Conley and colleagues examined the extent to which [sexually transmitted infections](#) and sexual behavior were perceived as risky compared to other deadlier behaviors.

Study participants were asked to make judgments about one of two risky

behaviors—one associated with STIs (unprotected sex) and the other associated with driving. The researchers also assessed the negative perceptions of people who transmit STIs compared to those who transmit another nonsexual disease.

Participants were asked to estimate how many of 1,000 people would be expected to die driving from Detroit to Chicago (about 300 miles) compared with the same number expected to die from an HIV/AIDS-related cause. Most believed 17 times as many people would die from contracting HIV in one encounter.

Data from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Highway Traffic Safety report, on average, that a person is 20 times more likely to die from a car accident on a trip of 300 miles.

"In other words, participants' impressions of the riskiness of unprotected sex compared with driving were highly inaccurate," Conley said.

Participants viewed [unprotected sex](#) as being more risky than the more mundane, but more dangerous activity of driving, she said.

More information: Terri D. Conley et al. Sexuality-Related Risks are Judged more Harshly than Comparable Health Risks, *International Journal of Sexual Health* (2015). [DOI: 10.1080/19317611.2015.1063556](https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2015.1063556)

Provided by University of Michigan

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