

America's STD rate at record high again

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(HealthDay)—There's another epidemic sweeping the United States: sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).

Statistics for 2019—the latest data available from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention—show that STD rates in the United States hit a new high again for the sixth straight year.

In 2019, nearly 2.5 million Americans had an infection of chlamydia, gonorrhea or syphilis, the CDC said. And early data from 2020 suggest that these trends are continuing.

It's a dramatic and unnecessary comeback for illnesses Americans had nearly defeated.

"Less than 20 years ago, gonorrhea rates in the U.S. were at historic lows, syphilis was close to elimination, and advances in chlamydia diagnostics made it easier to detect infections," researcher Dr. Raul Romaguera, acting director for CDC's Division of STD Prevention, said in a CDC news release.

"That progress has since unraveled, and our STD defenses are down. We must prioritize and focus our efforts to regain this lost ground and control the spread of STDs," Romaguera added.

The new research found about 2.5 million cases of chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis in 2019, which is an almost 30% increase in these STDs between 2015 and 2019. Gay and bisexual men accounted for nearly half of all 2019 primary and secondary syphilis cases, the CDC reported.

The highest increase was in syphilis among newborns, which nearly quadrupled between 2015 and 2019.

'Sense of urgency'

One obstetrician/gynecologist believes the pandemic may make things even worse going forward. Dr. Jill Maura Rabin said that some of the

rise in STD rates among Americans might be due to better detection of cases.

But "since COVID-19 staff have been deployed away from routine health screening for sexually transmitted infections and partner services, we are underprepared. And yet we have to act, even with an undercapacity workforce," said Rabin. She is vice chair of education and development in obstetrics and gynecology at Northwell Health in New Hyde Park, N.Y.

Romaguera agreed. "STDs will not wait for the pandemic to end, so we must rise to the challenge now," he said. "These new data should create a sense of urgency and mobilize the resources needed, so that future reports can tell a different story."

The CDC explained that people with these STDs do not always have symptoms. But, if untreated, some can increase the risk of HIV, or cause chronic pelvic pain, pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, severe complications for pregnancy and newborns, and even infant death.

Rabin pointed out that "although many sexually transmitted infections are treatable with antibiotics, they make the human body more vulnerable to other infections including viruses, which are not generally curable. They also have long-term and far-reaching effects on health and fertility for our population."

Although STDs increased across many groups in 2019, racial and ethnic minorities, gay and bisexual men, and youth were hit the hardest.

According to the new report:

- STD rates were 5 to 8 times higher for Black people than for [white people](#),

- 3 to 5 times higher for American Indian or Alaska Native and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islanders than for whites, and
- 1 to 2 times higher for Hispanic people than for white people.
- Gay and [bisexual men](#) accounted for nearly half of all 2019 primary and secondary syphilis cases.
- Gonorrhea rates were 42 times higher among heterosexual men in some areas.
- Young people aged 15 to 24 made up 61% of chlamydia cases and 42% of gonorrhea cases.

Protect yourself

According to researcher Jo Valentine, "Focusing on hard-hit populations is critical to reducing disparities." Valentine is associate director of the Office of Health Equity in CDC's Division of STD Prevention.

"To effectively reduce these disparities, the social, cultural, and economic conditions that make it more difficult for some populations to stay healthy must be addressed. These include poverty, unstable housing, drug use, lack of medical insurance or regular medical provider, and high burden of STDs in some communities," she added.

Outreach efforts can help, the CDC researchers said, including STD express clinics that provide testing and treatment without a full clinical exam, and partnerships with pharmacies and health clinics that can create new places for STD services like testing and treatment. Telehealth services can also bridge gaps in testing and treatment, especially in rural areas.

But what about protecting yourself from an STD?

Rabin stressed that "you cannot tell if someone has a sexually transmitted infection by looking at them. Just because someone doesn't

have a discharge or a sore doesn't mean they're not infectious."

She said that, barring sexual abstinence, tried and true barrier methods such as condoms and dental dams can slash your odds for a sexually transmitted disease.

And "getting the HPV vaccine will help protect you against cervical and penile cancer," Rabin added. "This is approved for up to age 46 for both men and women."

She said the latest grim statistics from the CDC "speak to the fact that people are simply becoming more lax. Twenty years ago we almost eradicated syphilis, and gonorrhea rates were at their lowest. Our defenses are down and we need to catch up quickly."

The CDC's STD Surveillance Report was released April 13.

More information: For more on STDs, head to the [U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

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