

THE DREADED

The popular rock group Bon Jovi has a song titled "Love is a Social Disease". This title is not far from the truth. While love is certainly social, love itself will not give one a disease. On the other hand sex, as associated with love, may expose one to many social diseases. These social diseases are properly termed sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). While casual social contact such as a party or date has no possibility of transmitting an STD, nowadays the casual social contact is often a prelude to casual sex.

"Despite what the media hipsters say," writes Samuel S. Montefiore in a *Psychology Today* article ("Love, Lies & Fear in the Plague Years"; Sept/Oct 1992), "Montefiore believes casual sex is alive and well among the twentysomething set."

Casual sex or promiscuity is increasingly portrayed in the movies as glamorous and desirable — an example of this is Madonna in *Truth or Dare*. Unfortunately, movies almost never show the real consequences of promiscuity and casual sex.

"From the classic venereal diseases of gonorrhea and syphilis the number of sexually transmitted disease agents has grown to over 20 during the past two decades," say Richard L. Sweet and Ronald Gibbs in *Infectious Diseases of the Female Genital Tract*. Therefore, it is imperative that every sexually active person be aware of the modes of transmission and consequences of STDs, say Sweet and Gibbs, and especially important, how to protect oneself from them.

The traditional diseases were curable with antimicrobial therapy, but the newer STDs are associated with larger, incurable conditions. Emphasis has been placed by the Center for Disease Control (CDC) on chlamydia, herpes simplex virus (HSV), human papilloma virus (HPV), hepatitis B (HBV), and to the fatal disease AIDS caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

This redirection does not reflect the emergence of new pathogens (disease producing agents), with the exception of AIDS. These diseases are more apparent now because of improved laboratory diagnostic techniques that helped investigators discover the true extent, transmission and consequences of STDs. The age of sexually active adults has lowered and as a result the incidences of chlamydia, HSV and HPV have risen. Also some infections that are spread by different modes are now being transmitted sexually; these include hepatitis B virus (HBV) and cytomegalovirus (CMV).

"With the exception of AIDS, STDs are now associated with more serious longterm consequences in women than in men," Sweet and Gibbs wrote in *Infectious Diseases*. "These



SANDRA SHAP (NYC DEPT. OF HEALTH), "YOU CAN'T LIVE ON HOPE"

BY CLAIRE E. TRAMMELL

SOCIAL DISEASES

complications include: 1) an increased risk for genital cancer with HPV; 2) loss of reproductive capability because of damage to the fallopian tubes with chlamydia; 3) complications of pregnancy, including prematurity; 4) transmission of serious fatal infections to the fetus or newborn, such as syphilis, gonorrhea, HSV, chlamydia, CMV, or HBV."

There are more than 20 STDs. The most common among them are syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia, HPV, HBV and HSV. Knowledge of the causes and manifestations are imperative to their prevention and possible cure, though some are currently incurable. Among the STDs that are curable are syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia.

SYPHILIS

As described in *Infectious Diseases of the Female Genital Tract*, syphilis is a chronic infectious process due to the a spirochete *Treponema pallidum*.

Syphilis is an STD that is acquired through skin contact with a chancre (the primary lesion) which appears at the site where the spirochete entered the body (usually the genital area) three to four weeks after contact. Syphilis can be detected by a blood test. If untreated, the chancre disappears in three to six weeks.

In second stage syphilis a generalized body rash may appear which may last from two to six weeks. After the rash disappears, the patient enters the latent stage in which no symptoms are apparent. The patient may still transmit the disease for up to one year after contracting syphilis. If left untreated for over one year syphilis may cause progressive damage to the central nervous system, musculoskeletal system or cardiovascular system.

"It is estimated that about 120,000 new cases of primary and secondary syphilis occur annually in the United States," Sweet and Gibbs wrote in *Infectious Diseases*. Tests to detect syphilis rely on direct smears with the chancre and blood tests to determine the presence of antibodies.

Anyone who has had a sexual partner diagnosed with syphilis should be treated and penicillin is the drug of choice. For those allergic to penicillin other drugs are available. The doses of penicillin are usually low and maintained for periods of one-two weeks.

Other than the first two stages, syphilis has no symptoms and for a fetus syphilis may mean death. For these reasons pregnant women are screened for syphilis at their first prenatal care appointment. If syphilis is found and eradicated before the fourth month of pregnancy, a healthy birth is possible.

GONORRHEA

"Historical records indicate that gonorrhea is the oldest STD and its symptoms were documented in the Old Testament," Sweet and Gibbs wrote. According to *Infectious Diseases of the Female Genital Tract*, "Gonorrhea is caused by a bacteria and the law requires doctors to report any cases of gonorrhea to public health officials, therefore gonorrhea is the most commonly reported STD. Because gonorrhea is not always reported the estimated number of new cases a year is approximately two million."

The symptoms of infection are painful urination and a puslike discharge. In males the symptoms are usually apparent, but in females the infection may be "asymptomatic" (having no symptoms). When a woman does show symptoms, she may also have abnormal bleeding and pelvic discomfort. Gonorrhea is detected usually by a cervical culture for women and a similar sample obtained from the male penis.

Gonorrhea is usually treated with a single dose of ampicillin, penicillin, or amoxicillin. For pregnant women erythromycin is recommended. If the disease is not eradicated before birth and the baby is delivered vaginally the infection will affect the eyes. The eyes will be treated with the normal drops used at birth and then irrigated hourly until the discharge is eliminated.

CHLAMYDIA

According to *Infectious Diseases of the Female Genital Tract*, "Chlamydia is the most common STD in the United States and it is estimated to cause over four million new cases of infection each year." Chlamydia is caused by a bacteria called chlamydia trachomatis and is considered to be the leading cause of preventable blindness in the world.

Symptoms of chlamydia infection are painful urination and puslike discharge. These are the same symptoms as gonorrhea infection and the two are often partners in a double infection. This is unfortunate because the gonorrhea may be treated without the possibility of chlamydia being considered.

The chlamydia infection usually goes unnoticed because it is frequently asymptomatic (for women) and can pass undetected into the upper genital tract and cause serious complications. For women these may include pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility and pregnancy complications.

The most commonly infected site within the female is the cervix and this may make the female body more susceptible to pelvic inflammatory disease (inflammation of the tissue of the uterus or fallopian tubes). Inflammation of the fallopian tubes is called salpingitis, and infertility may result if the scar tissue from infection blocks the fallopian tubes.

Pregnant women may also infect their infants during birth. A baby born to an infected mother may develop an eye infection, which is why most states require that drops of silver

nitrate be put in each newborn's eyes to prevent any STD infection.

Males are more likely to infect females simply because males have fewer mucous membrane openings in the genital area. But females may also infect males, which is a good reason anyone with an STD of any type should inform all of their sexual partners. Fortunately for men, the infections are usually symptomatic, but if the infection is left untreated may cause urethritis (infection of the urethra).

Diagnosis of chlamydia infection is done with a culture test of the cervix, or for men a urine sample will suffice. The usual treatment for chlamydia is tetracycline or erythromycin for seven days.

Syphilis, gonorrhea and chlamydia are all curable, but there are STDs which are incurable and these include genital human papillomavirus (HPV), hepatitis B (HBV) and herpes (HSV).

GENITAL HUMAN PAPILOMOVIRUS

Human papilloma virus (HPV) is an STD and causes genital warts. These may appear as cauliflower-like warts on the genitals. The appearance may vary because there have now been over 60 types of genital warts identified. HPV is spread through skin to skin contact with an infected person while the virus is being shed. Genital warts are highly contagious and experts say that if AIDS were not around, genital warts would be the story of the decade.

"The disease is so infectious that two-thirds of sex partners of persons with genital warts develop the disease, with an average incubation period of two to three months," Janet Hyde wrote in *Understanding Human Sexuality*. As stated in *Infectious Diseases of the Female Genital Tract*, "Young, sexually active adolescents and adults are the highest prevalence group for genital warts and the lesions occur in the urogenital

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