

To Your HEALTH Fresno County

Highlighting public health issues and ways to improve personal, family, neighborhood and community health



Impact of Teen Sexual Activity on Public Health

August 20, 2015

If you live in the United States, are younger than 25, and are sexually active, your chance of acquiring a sexually transmitted disease (STD) is the same as making a wrong call on a coin toss. In other words, one in every two sexually active persons will acquire an STD by age 25.¹

It is estimated that as many as one in five Americans have genital herpes (which is incurable, but medically manageable) and up to 90% of those with herpes are unaware that they have it.² One source suggests that by 2025 up to 40% of men and 50% of all women will be infected with genital herpes.³

The total estimated direct cost of STDs annually in the U.S. is almost \$16 billion.⁴

Of the numerous [infectious diseases](#) transmitted primarily through sexual intercourse the three that are mandated by state statute to be reported to the local health department are [chlamydia](#), [gonorrhea](#) and [syphilis](#).

Earlier this month the California Department of Public Health made available the 2014 Local Health Jurisdiction [STD Summary Sheets](#).

In Fresno County in 2014, 5689 cases of chlamydia were reported, placing our county at number 3 of the 58 counties in incidence rate. We ranked 4th in incidence rate of gonorrhea with 1507 cases reported. Of these cases, 445 had BOTH chlamydia and gonorrhea. While not ranking quite as high (10 of 58) in incidence rate of syphilis, Fresno County had 151 cases reported in 2014. Furthermore, alarming racial and ethnic disparities exist in the rates of these diseases.

The unprecedented increase in incidence of syphilis in women and newborns (congenital syphilis), from 2011 to present, resulted in my designating Fresno County as an area of high syphilis morbidity, thus mandating more frequent screening for the disease during pregnancy. Additionally, a call was made for the convening of a statewide meeting of STD experts in Fresno on September 2nd to discuss strategies to better limit the spread of the disease.

While both chlamydia and gonorrhea often do not lead to serious illness and, in fact, can have no symptoms, both can result in serious adverse health outcomes including pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy, tubal infertility, perinatal infections, chronic pelvic pain, and increased risk of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other STDs. Untreated syphilis can lead to damage of the nervous system, heart, liver, bones, and joints, and eventually to death. Transmission of syphilis to the fetus from the mother during pregnancy ([Congenital Syphilis](#)) is devastating for the newborn.

[Risks for all STDs](#) include: unprotected sex, multiple sex partners, anonymous sex, and sex under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Sixty four percent of the cases of chlamydia and forty eight percent of the cases of gonorrhea in Fresno County in 2014 occurred in individuals 15 to 24 years of age.

Sadly, the high rate of these STDs in this age group is reflected in the high rate of teen births in our county. In 2012, Fresno County ranked number 5 in the state with a rate of 43 teen births per 1000 teen females (a total of 1622 teen births).

According to the California Department of Public Health, “Early childbearing often negatively impacts academic achievement, earning potential for mother and father, maternal and infant outcomes, and early childhood development.”⁵ Dr. Saul Hoffman, a Professor of Economics and Department Chair at the University of Delaware believes that, “The children of teenage mothers are more likely to have a lower school achievement and drop out of high school, have more health problems, be incarcerated at some time during adolescence, give birth as a teenager, and face unemployment as a young adult.”⁶

The problem is further compounded by the fact that 1 in 5 of the births to moms age 18 to 19 was a repeat birth. This is a known risk for pre-term birth and can have serious health and developmental consequences.

A multitude of family, peer, community, and [individual factors](#) put young women at risk for teen pregnancy.

How do we, as the Pillars of Public Health, work to reduce the negative impact of these STDs and teen births on the health of our community?

As individuals, go to the CDC, CDPH, or FCDPH websites and learn more about the signs and symptoms of STDs, what puts you at risk for infection, and how to protect yourself. Learn about the consequences of teen pregnancy, how this can be prevented, and implement a plan of prevention that will work for you. Visit your health care provider if you are experiencing signs that may be related to infection with an STD or if you feel that you are at risk for infection. Discuss protection from STDs and unplanned pregnancy with your provider. Visit [Stay Teen](#) to find out more.

As families, have frank, honest discussions about sexual health, sexual behavior, and healthy relationships.

As health care providers, know who you must screen for these infections and know the most current treatment, follow up, and evaluation and treatment of sexual partners (making full use of [Expedited Partner Therapy](#)). Screen for these infections at every opportunity. Inform your patients about the benefits of the Human Papilloma Virus vaccine. Inquire about sexual activity and discuss pregnancy prevention with your patients. Don't hesitate to have these conversations in the clinic. Don't assume that your patient is not engaging in high risk behaviors that can lead to infection or unplanned pregnancy.

As educators, ensure that your sexual education curricula are given priority, begun early, are comprehensive, and reflect best practices in sexual health, sexual behavior, healthy relationships, and healthy communication about sexual activity.

As retailers, take a serious look at your advertising. Identify and remove inappropriate behavior messages, especially those that could influence children and adolescents.

As community and spiritual leaders, determine what barriers exist for members of your community when it comes to protective sexual practices, healthy relationships, and access to preventive care, and implement action to overcome those barriers.

As public officials, encourage community awareness of sexual health and healthy relationships. Assure and encourage access to preventive health services. Ensure that resources for protection from STDs and unplanned pregnancy are readily available.

Let us strive together for a Fresno County where sexually transmitted disease is a very rare thing and teenagers have all our support and information needed to make smart decisions.

I encourage you to send me your thoughts and ideas on personal and community health in Fresno County. E-mail me at ToYourHealth@co.fresno.ca.us.

I also ask for your help in spreading the word about personal and community health to everyone in Fresno County. Please forward this message to others who may be interested and encourage them to sign up for my letters [here](#).

Here's to your health!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ken Bird", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Dr. Ken Bird, Fresno County Health Officer

Citations:

1. American Sexual Health Association <http://www.ashasexualhealth.org/stdsstis/statistics/> (accessed 8/7/15)
2. Fleming DT et al. (1997). Herpes simplex virus type 2 in the United States, 1976-1994. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 337, 1105-1111.
3. Sutton, Amy L., ed. *Sexually Transmitted Diseases Sourcebook*. Detroit, MI: Omnigraphics; 2006.
4. CDC Fact Sheet
<http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats/STI-Estimates-Fact-Sheet-Feb-2013.pdf> (accessed 8/10/15)
5. California Teen Birth Rate Continues Drop
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/Pages/NR13-030.aspx> (accessed 8/7/15)
6. Hoffman SD. *Kids Having Kids: Economic Costs and Social Consequences of Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute Press; 2008.