

The scourge of sexually transmitted diseases

The World Health Organization reports that each year some 340 million new cases of syphilis, gonorrhoea, chlamydia and trichomoniasis occur in men and women aged 15-49. Overall, Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI) prevalence rates continue to rise in most countries. The majority of HIV infections are sexually transmitted or associated with pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. The interactions between sexual and reproductive health and HIV/AIDS are now widely recognized. Studies show that, unfortunately, the millennium development goals cannot and will not be achieved without ensuring access to Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Services which must encompass an effective global response to HIV/AIDS.

Sexually transmissible diseases or venereal diseases (STDs) belong to the group of “infectious diseases”. These include more than 30 diseases caused by bacteria, viruses, fungi or parasites. The common factor with STDs is that they are mainly transmitted during sexual intercourse. There are, however, differences in the degree of infectiousness of the causative agents, the course of the disease and possible therapeutic or preventive measures.

It is worth noting that the classical, venereal diseases (Syphilis, Gonorrhoea) have lost their horror image, since they have become curable with antibiotics. For a long time now, there has also been a protective vaccination available against hepatitis B, another serious, sexually transmissible disease. Undoubtedly, the most feared STD today is AIDS, since neither a curative drug nor a protective vaccination are available yet.

Infection with an STD occurs primarily during sexual intercourse through the direct contact of infected body fluids (such as seminal and vaginal fluid) with mucous membranes. Most venereal diseases, especially herpes infections, can also be transmitted via oral sex, kissing or petting (again via direct contact with infected body fluids). An infection can also be transmitted from the mother to the unborn or new-born child. Some venereal diseases (Hepatitis B, AIDS and Syphilis) can also be transmitted via the blood, by infected blood preserves and blood products or by the exchanges of syringes between drug addicts. With some pathogens an indirect infection via towels, toilet articles and so on is also possible, though very rare. Infection via drops (e.g. coughing, sneezing) is not possible. In the course of every day social contacts (household, workplace, travel, etc) infection with an STD can be excluded, provided normal rules of hygiene are observed.

The majority of STDs (most important exceptions: Hepatitis B and AIDS) manifest themselves initially at the place of entry i.e. penis, vagina and labia (lips of the vulva). The anus and buccal cavity (mouth) may also be affected. Some STDs are simply unpleasant while others are dangerous: if they remain untreated, they can spread throughout the whole body and may, in some instances, cause irreparable

damage such as infertility, brain damage or blindness. The most dangerous STD, the HIV infection, leads, as far as we know today, after 12 years on average to the terminal stage, AIDS, which ends in death.

The best way to prevent STDs is to exhibit wise behaviour in selecting your sexual partners by adhering to the advice given herebelow so as to reduce your risk of developing an STD:

- Have a mutually monogamous sexual relationship with an uninfected partner.
- Correctly and consistently use a male condom
- Use clean needles if injecting intravenous drugs
- Prevent and control other STDs to decrease susceptibility to HIV infection and to reduce your infectiousness if you are HIV-infected
- Delay having sexual relations as long as possible. The younger people are when having sex for the first time, the more susceptible they become to developing an STD. The risk of acquiring an STD also increases with the number of partners over a lifetime.

Anyone who is sexually active should:

- Have regular checkups for STDs even in the absence of symptoms and, especially, if having sex with a new partner. These tests can be done during a routine visit to the doctor's office.
- Learn the common symptoms of STDs. Seek medical help immediately if any suspicious symptoms develop, even if they are mild.
- Avoid having sex during menstruation. HIV-infected women are probably more infectious and HIV-uninfected women are probably more susceptible to becoming infected during that time.
- Avoid anal intercourse, but if practiced, use a male condom.
- Avoid douching because it removes some of the normal protective bacteria in the vagina and increases the risk of getting some STDs.

Anyone diagnosed as having an STD should:

- Be treated to reduce the risk of transmitted an STD to an infant
- Discuss with a doctor the possible risk of transmission in breast milk and whether it should be substituted by a commercial formula
- Notify all recent sex partners and urge them to undergo a check up
- Follow the doctor's orders and complete the full course of medication prescribed. A follow-up test to ensure that the infection has been cured is often an important step in treatment.
- Avoid all sexual activity while being treated for an STD.

Occasionally people are too frightened or embarrassed to ask for help or information. It is prudent to point out that most STDs are readily treated. Consequently, the earlier a person seeks treatment and warns sex partners about the disease, the less likely the disease will cause irreparable physical damage, be spread to others or, in the case of a woman, be passed on to the newborn baby.

It is of paramount importance for each and every one of us to realize that learning about the STDs is every human being's responsibility. Furthermore, knowledge of STDs as well as honesty and openness with sex partners and with one's doctor, plays a protagonistic role in reducing the incidence as well as the complications of sexually transmitted diseases.