

# Content Warning!

The following contains very graphic images (diseased female anatomy) that may be disturbing to some readers.



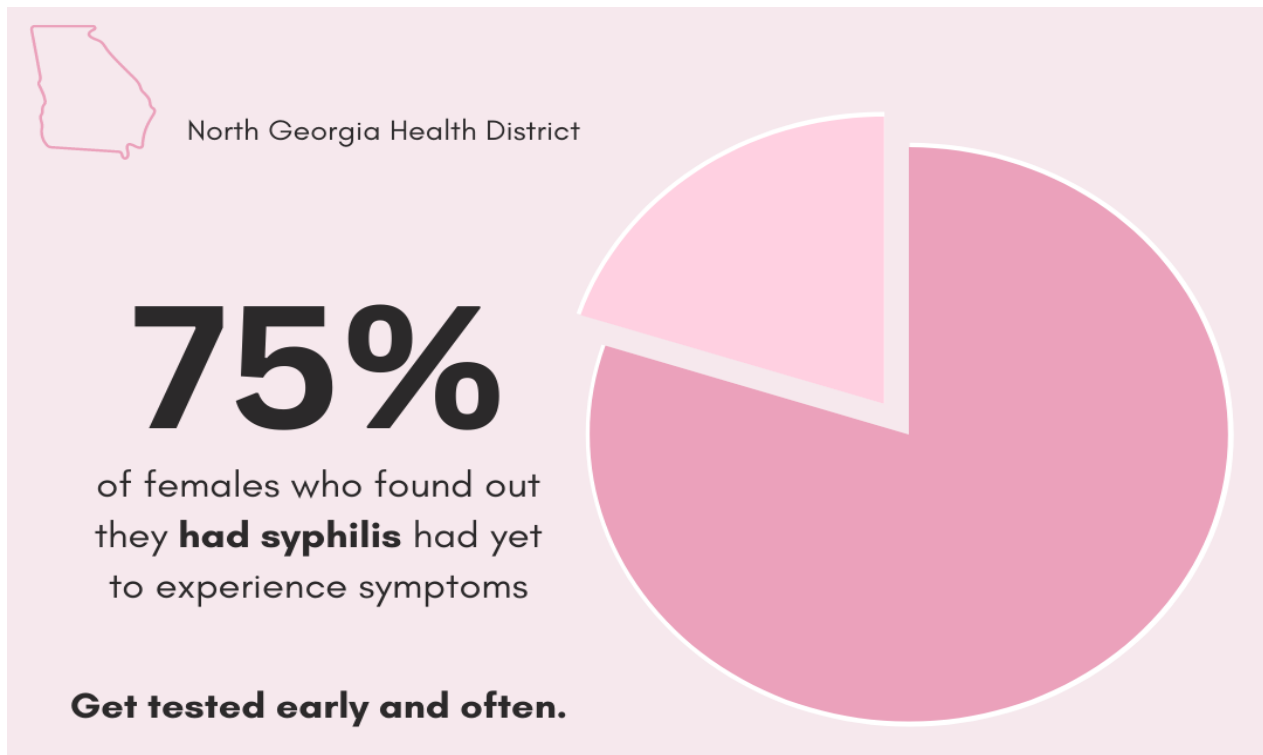
CHEROKEE WOMEN'S HEALTH SPECIALISTS

# The STD Crisis

The Alarming Rise of STDs in Georgia  
Among Women 15-24



# Why Didn't Anyone Tell Me This?



Written by the physicians of Cherokee Women's Health Specialists, PC

Copyright © 2023 Cherokee Women's Health Specialists, PC

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

## **Table of Contents**

STDs on the Rise at an Alarming Rate	5
Why the Sudden Increase of STDs in Georgia?	7
What is Causing the Increase of STDs Among Adolescents?	9
What is the Difference Between an STI and an STD?	10
The Silent Symptoms of STIs	11
The Known Risks and Problems Associated with STDs	12
Patient Stories	21
Who Should Get Tested for STIs?	29
Final Thoughts	33

# 1

## CHAPTER ONE

### **STDs on the Rise at an Alarming Rate**

STDs are on the rise in the U.S. at an alarming rate. According to the most recent data from the CDC, not only has the infection rate of STDs in the U.S. increased, but the state of Georgia has climbed to #3 in the country. What is especially concerning is the increase in sexually transmitted diseases among adolescents in the country - and especially Georgia. STDs are being spread among younger people ages 15-24 at a faster rate than any other age group. Not only is the age group increasing at a faster rate, but the CDC reports that in Georgia, adolescents account for 58% of all STDs.

#### **STD Data**

Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows the worst STD infection rates are Mississippi, Louisiana and Georgia. The South makes up most of the highest rates of sexually transmitted diseases of all the states. Seven of the top ten states with the highest STD rates are in the south.

In the data collected by the CDC, the sexually transmitted diseases that were tracked were chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis and HIV. Georgia's rates for these four STDs are 1,535 per 100,000. Of particular concern in Georgia was the increase in gonorrhea and syphilis, both of which can be dangerous if left untreated.

Most cases of syphilis and gonorrhea are found when a patient undergoes routine testing and has no symptoms at all. This is concerning and could be the reason behind the surge of these types of STDs. **They are being spread because people are unaware that they have these STDs and are having unprotected sex.**

Other STDs on the rise are HPV (human papillomavirus), herpes, genital warts, trichomoniasis and hepatitis A, B and C.

The CDC says that testing for STDs is one of the most important things you can do to protect your health.



*“The first and only time I got gonorrhea I didn’t even know I had it. It was terrifying. I remember being on my period and feeling like the cramps were getting even more painful, like someone was actually stabbing my uterus. I felt this big push and blood was literally everywhere. I tested positive for gonorrhea!”*



# 2

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Why the Sudden Increase of STDs in Georgia?**

The cases of STDs in Georgia seem to be climbing at a faster pace than other states. Georgia public officials and those in the healthcare field are fully aware of this crisis and are looking into the potential causes and how to improve the STD infection rate.

In an article published in January 2023 by the Innerbody, the largest medical online testing company, the CDC data was analyzed to try to find the key trends and reasons behind the findings. One theory for the reason why the southern states, including Georgia, are highest in STDs is that many lack affordable healthcare. Healthcare is expensive for many, especially without insurance, so testing and treatment is out of reach for some. Many rural areas do not have clinics where testing is available.



Alexander Millman, the Georgia State Department of Health medical director shares, “Folks who are disproportionately affected generally tend to be patients who have limited access to health-care.”

Officials and healthcare workers in Georgia say that another reason for the surge is that condoms are not being used as often during sex.

***“Other factors for the rise are less frequent testing and the stigmas involved with testing and treatment.”***

- Alexander Millman, Medical Director of Georgia State Department of Health



*“I made the mistake of not using a condom. A month later, I got a routine STD test and I tested positive for chlamydia.” - Bella M.*



# 3

## CHAPTER THREE

### **What is Causing the Increase of STDs Among Adolescents?**

Another alarming statistic is that STDs are increasing at a faster rate among adolescents. Those in the 14-24 age group account for more than half of the STDs in the country. In Georgia, the latest report shows that it's even higher than the national average, at 58% of all STDs reported.

Dr. Mike Litrel, an OB/GYN at Cherokee Women's Health Specialists in Woodstock, GA, has been treating women with GYN problems for 30 years. When asked his opinion on the rise of STDs among women ages 15-24 in Georgia, he says, "Women suffer the consequences of sex far more than men, resulting in unintended pregnancy, sexual infections, infertility and even cancer. It's devastating for a young woman to get genital warts or herpes that can last her entire life.

Even more devastating is when they die or become infertile. Twenty years ago, I saw a teenager die from cancer. Five years ago, I did emergency surgery on Easter Sunday for a young woman who almost died from an infection. She survived but sadly, lost her uterus and ovaries. She will never have children and is menopausal at 19 years old.

Younger women are often embarrassed to talk about sex. Sometimes they may feel pressured to have sex before they are mature enough to be ready for it. Sometimes they just want to do it and don't understand all the consequences."

***"This stigma needs to stop. Women of all ages need to be empowered and take control of their own health."***

- Dr. Mike Litrel of Cherokee Women's Health Specialists  
Cherokee County Board of Health Chairman 2001-2013; Board member 2013-current  
The Hope Center for Pregnancy Crisis, Medical Director 2006-current  
Cherokee County Health Department, Director of Women's Health Services 1999-2010

# 4

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **What is the Difference Between an STI and an STD?**

STIs and STDs are not the same thing. They are often used interchangeably, but in medical terms, they are different. An STI is a sexually transmitted infection, which is when bacteria or a virus gets in the body. An STD is a sexually transmitted disease, which is when the infection progresses to the point that a person starts to show symptoms.

***An STI is a sexually transmitted infection is when bacteria or a virus gets in the body.***

***An STD is a sexually transmitted disease, which is when the infection progresses to the point that a person starts to show symptoms.***

If a person has no signs of symptoms, getting tested for an STI will show if they have the bacterial or virus in their body. But if symptoms are already showing up, such as genital warts or a rash, the STI has become an STD. It's helpful to know you have an STI before it becomes an STD so you can get treatment early.

# 5

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **The Silent Symptoms of STIs**

One of the problems with many sexually transmitted infections is that they can stay in your body for some time before symptoms show up. Many STDs do not present themselves for weeks, months or even more. So, if a person is unaware that they are infected with a sexually transmitted infection and continues to have unprotected sex, they unknowingly spread the disease.

***“In 2021 in Georgia, 75.1% of female syphilis cases were latent, or asymptomatic. In other words, 75.1% of all females who found out they had syphilis had yet to experience any symptoms.”***

- Bridget Walsh of North Georgia Health District

Bridget Walsh, MPH, an Epidemiologist and the STD supervisor at the North Georgia Health District is seeing the number of STDs increase in the state and is helping to educate others about this epidemic. She has noticed that with increased testing, there is a much better chance of finding STIs that are latent, or asymptomatic.

Walsh goes on to say, “With more testing, we can discover STIs in people even before symptoms arise. Earlier discovery of STIs is best for everyone. There will be less spreading of the infection and those infected can get earlier treatment, which in the long run, is much better for their health.”

# 6

## CHAPTER SIX

### **The Known Risks and Problems Associated with STDs**

It is foolish to think that STDs are not harmful. All sexually transmitted infections and diseases come with a certain amount of health risk. It is a risk not only for the person with the disease, but for your partner, your future partners, and possibly your children. If anyone has been sexually active, especially without protection, it is important to get tested before exposing anyone else. If anyone has signs or symptoms of an STD, it is even more critical to get tested and/or treated as soon as possible. Not all sexually transmitted diseases are the same. Some are much worse to get than others. Certain STDs are dangerous to carry for a long time without knowing the infection is in your body.

Here is a list of the worst STDs to get and what can be expected if you get them.

#### **HIV**

Most everyone is familiar with HIV and the dangers of contracting HIV and AIDs. Although we have come a long way with treatment over the last several decades, there is still no cure. HIV is a viral condition which means that no cure currently exists. It is important for anyone who is sexually active to get tested for HIV often. If HIV is found, the sooner treatment begins, the better prognosis for optimal health.

HIV can lead to multiple health issues including rashes, genital sores, flu-like symptoms, persistent diarrhea and organ failure and even death.

## Syphilis

Syphilis can not only be a painful disease, but it can potentially be fatal. It is spread through vagina, oral or anal sex. Usually symptoms appear about three weeks after someone has been exposed. However, this is not always the case.



*Teen female with symptoms of syphilis two months after sexual relations with infected partner*

There are four stages of syphilis and each stage has different symptoms. The stages are:

- Primary
- Secondary
- Latent
- Tertiary

### **Primary Stage Syphilis**

In primary stage syphilis, the first noticeable sign is a single sore or multiple sores. The place on your body where you contracted syphilis is where you contracted the disease. In women, it is usually in or around the vagina. In men, it is on their penis. If a woman contracted it through giving oral sex, the sores will appear on her lips or mouth. The sores usually last a month to six weeks, whether you receive treatment or not. If treatment is not given, the infection moves to the secondary stage.

### **Secondary Stage Syphilis**

During the secondary stage, rashes and sores appear in the mouth, vagina or anus. There is usually a rash on more areas of the body, including the hands or bottom of the feet. The bumps are typically rough, red or reddish-brown. Other symptoms of the secondary stage are fever, swollen lymph glands, sore throat, hair loss, headaches, fatigue and body aches.

Without the proper treatment, syphilis can stay in your body for years and move to the latent or tertiary stage.

### **Latent Stage Syphilis**

The latent stage is when there are no visible signs or symptoms. With untreated syphilis, it can develop into the tertiary stage. This can affect the heart, blood vessels, brain and nervous system and can be life threatening.

### **Tertiary Stage Syphilis**

Tertiary syphilis is serious and usually occurs 10-30 years after infection. It damages your internal organs or causes death.

Without a diagnosis of syphilis or treatment - during any stage of the disease - it can spread to the brain, nervous system, eyes or ears. It can cause headaches, muscle weakness, eye pain, hearing loss, ringing in the ears, dizziness, vertigo, changes to your mental state, personality changes and dementia.

### **Congenital Syphilis**



*Baby born with syphilis*

If a woman has syphilis and becomes pregnant, she can pass the disease to her baby. Congenital syphilis can have a major impact on the baby's health. It can cause miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth, low birth weight or death shortly after birth.



Babies born with syphilis can have deformed bones, anemia, enlarged liver, jaundice, brain and nerve problems, meningitis, skin rashes blindness or deafness.

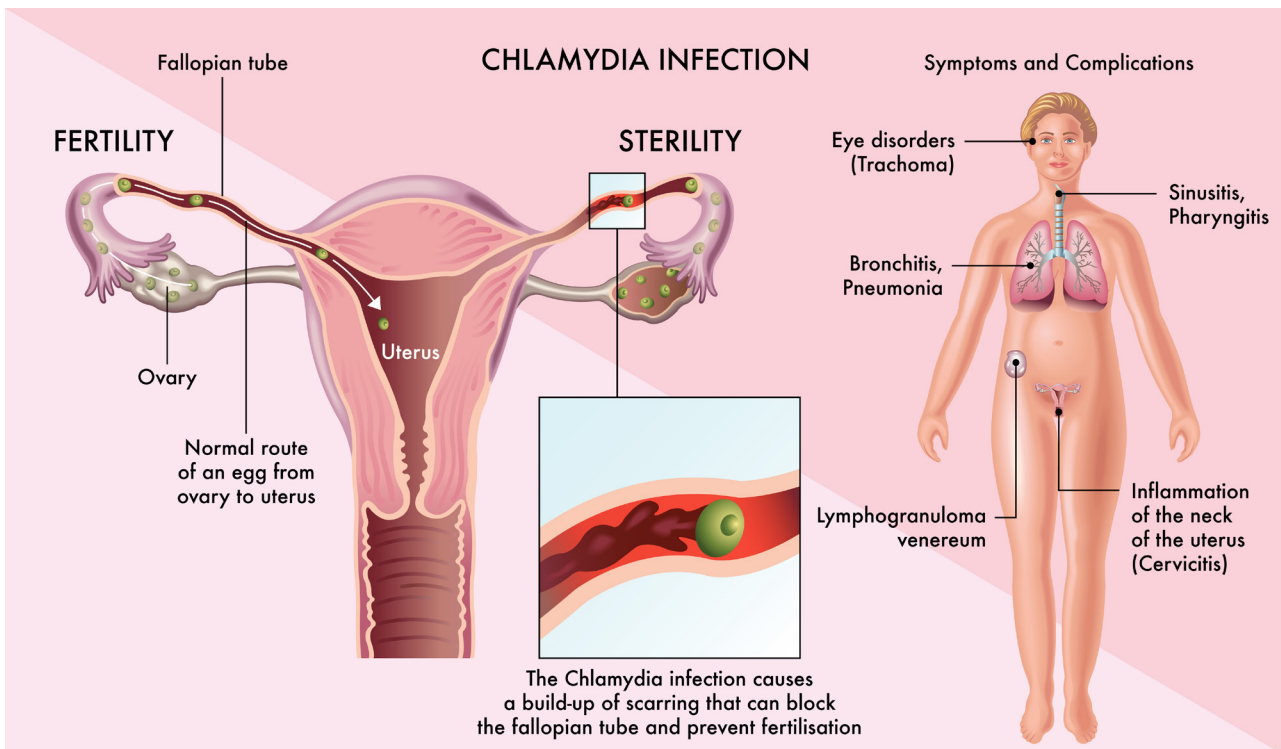
Congenital syphilis has tripled in recent years and the growth rate is alarming to public health officials. ACOG recommends that all pregnant women receive STD testing at their first initial OB visit and again at 36 weeks. Routine testing during pregnancy is not only for syphilis, but HIV, gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes, and hepatitis. If congenital syphilis is on the rise, it could be assumed that not enough pregnant women are getting proper prenatal care.

## Hepatitis

Hepatitis A, B and C can spread through vaginal, oral or anal sexual activities. Hepatitis is a viral disease but it may either be temporary or long-lasting. The worst-case scenario is that it can lead to liver disease and death. Hepatitis is a life-long disease.

Hepatitis is harder to detect than other STDs unless someone is tested. With HIV, syphilis, herpes, etc., painful sores or rashes usually make the STD obvious. Hepatitis symptoms don't present in the same way. Some of the symptoms are: fatigue, flu-like illness, dark urine, pale stool, loss of appetite, abdominal pain, jaundiced skin and yellow eyes. If anyone has any of these symptoms, it is imperative they seek diagnosis and treatment from a physician.

## Chlamydia



*Chlamydia can lead to infertility*

Chlamydia can be a serious disease if not found and treated. It can cause major health issues for women like pelvic inflammatory disease, scarring of the urethra, infertility, and complications during pregnancy.

About 70% of women who get chlamydia do not have symptoms but can spread it if they are sexually active. Sometimes the infection remains in your body for weeks, months or years without symptoms. If sexually active and without protection, undetected chlamydia is highly transmittable to other partners.

Often symptoms occur about 3 weeks after chlamydia is contracted. The most common symptoms in women are: pain when urinating, genital pain, abdominal pain, abnormal vaginal bleeding or discharge, eye pain and discharge, or rectal pain, bleeding or discharge. The treatment for chlamydia is antibiotics.

Often, a woman doesn't know she is infertile until it is time to try to have a baby. If chlamydia goes undetected or untreated, it can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease – which can then lead to infertility.

Pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) is an infection of a woman's reproductive organs. It can cause pain in the lower abdomen, fever, vaginal discharge with a foul odor, painful sex and abnormal vaginal bleeding, and pain and burning while urinating. Treatment is needed by an OB/GYN, which may involve surgery. The effects of the scar tissue formed inside and outside the fallopian tubes can lead to tubal blockage, ectopic pregnancy, infertility, and long-term pelvic pain.

## **Gonorrhea**

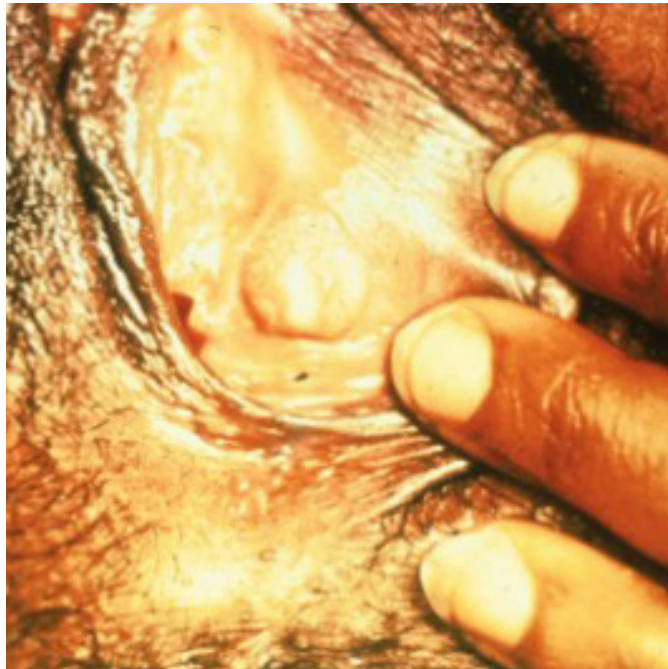
Gonorrhea has similar symptoms as chlamydia and can also cause a lot of the same problems. Sexually transmitted bacterial infection that can cause infertility. It is transmitted by vaginal, oral, or anal sex and is sometimes referred to as “the clap.” Once gonorrhea is diagnosed, it can be treated with antibiotics.

Gonorrhea has been more common in men, but recently has been quickly becoming more common in women. As with all STDs, the more partners a woman has, the greater the chance she can contract gonorrhea. The problem for women is that about 50-70% of all women don't have symptoms. They would only know if they were tested.

The initial symptoms in a woman may appear anywhere from a day to about two weeks after exposure, however it could appear much later. The most common symptoms for women are pain when peeing, a green or yellow discharge from the vagina, vaginal bleeding between periods or after sex, or pelvic pain, rectal bleeding, anal itching, or rectal discharge.

Untreated gonorrhoea can cause major health issues for women like pelvic inflammatory disease, long-term pelvic pain, scarring of the urethra, infertility, and complications during pregnancy. If left untreated gonorrhoea can also spread to a woman's bones or joints and can be life-threatening.

If a woman becomes pregnant and has gonorrhoea, she can give it to her baby. If left untreated, it can cause miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight or the baby can be born with eye infections.



*Young female with gonorrhoea symptoms*

## Herpes

Herpes infections are very common. About 50-80% of American adults have oral herpes, which is caused by HSV-1. Herpes simplex 1 is when cold sores or fever blisters appear in or around the mouth. Most people with oral herpes get it during childhood or young adulthood from non-sexual contact with saliva.

Genital herpes is caused by either HSV-1 or HSV-2. Oral herpes caused by HSV-1 can spread from the mouth to the genitals through oral sex. That is why some genital herpes are caused by HSV-1. Most genital herpes is spread through HSV-2 through vaginal, oral, or anal sex by someone who is infected.



*Young woman with genital herpes*

Women can get genital herpes if you have contact with: a herpes sore, saliva from a partner with an oral herpes infection, genital fluids from a partner with a genital herpes infection, skin in the oral area of a partner with oral herpes, skin in the genital area of a partner with genital herpes. You can also get genital herpes from having sex with someone who does not have a visible sore. It is also possible to get it if you receive oral sex from someone with oral herpes. You won't get herpes from toilet seats, beds, hot tubs or pools or touching anything like soap, silverware or towels.

Many women with herpes may not even know they have it if symptoms don't appear. Mild symptoms may go unnoticed or mistaken for other skin conditions. Genital herpes sores usually appear as blisters in or around the genitals or rectum.

They usually start showing up about 4-12 days after exposure. The blisters sometimes form in a cluster and are painful and filled with fluid. They may be different sizes and appear in different places. The blisters break or turn into sores that bleed or ooze a whitish fluid. Once medication starts, it may take a week or more to go away. Sometimes a woman can have flu-like symptoms with an outbreak such as fever, chills, body aches and swollen glands.

The first genital outbreak is typically the worst. Some people get 4-5 outbreaks per year, and some get less. It may lessen over time, or may not. There isn't usually a way to predict when an outbreak will occur, so it's good to keep the medication on hand to help lessen the severity of the outbreaks when they occur.

Herpes isn't necessarily one of the most dangerous STDs since it isn't life-threatening. However, herpes is more bothersome than most women realize. The main problem is there is no cure. If you get herpes, it is for life. You may have heard the expression, "it's the gift that keeps on giving". That is exactly right. Once you get herpes, you are stuck with it for life. You are obligated to inform every future sex partner that you have herpes. Condoms are a must, but even with condoms, they are not 100% effective in stopping the spread of herpes.

## **HPV**

HPV stands for the human papillomavirus. It is the most common sexually transmitted infection affecting millions of women in the US each year. There are many types of HPV and some can cause health problems such as cancer and genital warts.



*"I really wish someone would have educated me better about how it's spread so I wouldn't have to go through what I did." -Brittany F.*



A woman can get HPV by having vaginal, oral or anal sex with someone who has the virus. It is most commonly spread through regular vaginal sex. It also spreads through close skin-to-skin touching during sex. A person with HPV can pass the infection to someone even if they have no symptoms.

Anyone can get HPV if you are sexually active, even if it is the first time. You can also develop symptoms years after having sex with someone who had the infection. This makes it difficult to detect when you first got the infection. In most cases, HPV goes away on its own within two years without causing health problems. But if it doesn't go away, it can cause genital warts or cancer.

Genital warts usually appear as a bump or a cluster of bumps in the genitals. They can be big, small, raised or flat. An OB/GYN can usually diagnose warts by examination.

HPV can cause cervical cancer, or other cancers, including cancer of the vagina, vulva or anus. It can also cause throat cancer.

Every woman who is sexually active should routinely get screened for cervical cancer by their OB/GYN. If you are sexually active, using condoms can lower your chances of getting HPV. Testing, screening and being in a monogamous relationship are the best ways to prevent the spread of HPV.



*Regular testing for STDs is critical*





## CHAPTER SEVEN

### **Patient Stories**



## **Patient #1: Herpes**

“My sexual experience started when I was 15. Yes I know, I know I was young, but at the time I didn’t think so. My boyfriend was 17 and he was cute and fun to be with. I thought I really loved him, and I really trusted him. He kept pressuring me to show him I love him by having sex with him.

I wanted to wait awhile, but he was so persistent. But a part of me was curious because I really wanted to know what it felt like. At first, we did a lot of kissing and touching each other. Since I thought I loved him, I figured I was going to be with him forever. I eventually gave in, and we had sex.



*Teen girl with herpes sore on her mouth*

He did use a condom, and sex the first time didn’t feel as good as I expected. It was a little painful. But we did it about 5 more times over the next month or so and it didn’t hurt as much. He didn’t use a condom every time. I noticed that he didn’t treat me as well as he did at the beginning of our relationship, and it seemed like all we talked about was when and where we could hook up again. I started feeling bad about myself, guilty, and that maybe he didn’t love me as much as I loved him. We broke up and I was heartbroken.

About two weeks after our breakup, I started getting a horrible itchy and painful rash on my vagina. There were visible sores, even starting to go down my thighs. It looked disgusting and felt even worse. I knew I needed to go to the doctor, but I was terribly afraid to tell my mom. I was desperate and I knew I had to tell someone, so I confessed to my older sister. She immediately drove me to an OB/GYN office and demanded they see me for my emergency. I was so embarrassed. After testing, I found out I had genital herpes, HSV-2.

Genital herpes is a sexually transmitted disease that stays with you forever. I was given medication to get it under control. However, I have gotten 4-5 more outbreaks each year since then which requires continuing to take the medicine.

I am now 18 and regret losing my virginity. I also regret trusting my boyfriend. He most likely knew he had herpes, but he never told me. You don't have to be promiscuous to get an STD. It only takes one time. Now, for the rest of my life, I have to tell every potential partner that I have herpes before I have sex with them. Herpes is a life-altering disease. So please, be safe and be careful who you trust. Not everyone is as trusting as you think."

## Patient #2: Syphilis

“When I was 23, I met a guy who I thought could possibly be the one. We became friends and hung out all the time. I was ready to make love to him when the time was right. One night he stayed over, and it seemed like the right time. It seemed like the natural next step in our relationship. We spent the night together and made love. He wore a condom, but it broke while we were having sex. Over the next few weeks, we continued to hang out and have sex, using condoms for protection.

The good news is that I didn’t get pregnant from the one time the condom broke. I was not ready to have a baby at that time. The bad news is that he gave me syphilis and I lost respect for the man that I thought was perfect. About 2-3 weeks after our first sexual experience, I noticed a rash and sores that suddenly appeared on my vagina. The rash had already spread to my legs, and it honestly looked like I had some sort of awful disease like leprosy. I was so scared I was shaking in fear of what was going on with my body.



*Patient with syphilis*

Luckily, I was established with an OB/GYN, so they were able to see me immediately. After a blood test confirmed it was syphilis, I had to go in for shots of antibiotics every week for a month. The symptoms went away, but I will never forget the trauma of the whole ordeal that I went through.

So, what advice would I give to young women? I’d say that most people don’t even think about STDs and assume it won’t happen to them. That is absolutely not true. I recommend getting tested before you have sex with anyone, and make sure they are tested too. Honest and open communication with your partner is key. STDs are awful. It’s painful, scary, and embarrassing.

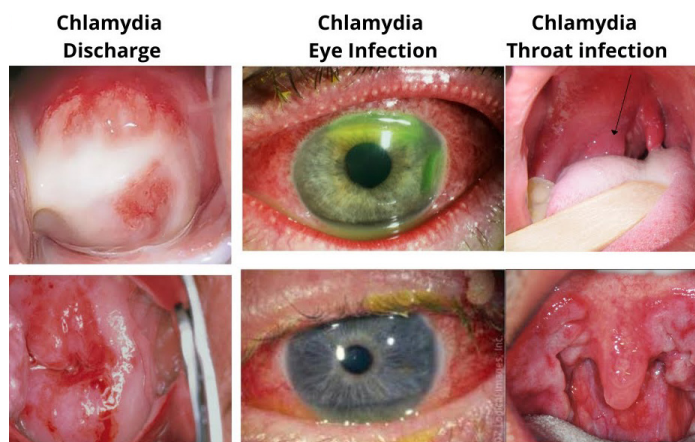
No matter how much you think you can trust your partner, get tested, get them tested, and always use condoms. You can't be too safe.

And by the way, apparently, he wasn't the guy for me. We broke up shortly after I found out he gave me syphilis. I just couldn't trust him after that. I'm currently still looking for 'the one!'

### Patient #3: Chlamydia

“I started being sexually active when I was 15 and all through high school. When I was 20 and in college, I had never had an STD before. I met a guy who seemed really cool and was on the football team. We hit it off immediately and ended up hooking up one night. We did not use a condom even though I felt deep down it was a mistake. But honestly, I was in the moment and taken in by this guy. Eventually we met up again for the second time and I knew he should have worn a condom, but he said he didn’t have one and that he was clean.

After that, I never saw him on campus again and he didn’t text or DM me. I started getting a bad feeling, and it worried me that I had unprotected sex twice. I didn’t have any symptoms, but still went to the school medical clinic to get tested for STIs.



*The many symptoms of chlamydia*

I got a call from the nurse saying that I tested positive for chlamydia. I was upset and couldn’t believe how someone could tell me they were clean when they weren’t. How can someone swear they are clean yet have something?

My advice to anyone would be to always wear protection every single time and get tested beforehand for all STDs. Don’t trust someone just because they say they are clean. Take charge of your sexual health and be aware that it only takes one time to get an STD.”



## Patient #4: Gonorrhea

I stayed a virgin for a long time, and actually didn't become sexually active until I was 24 and started working as a nurse.

I met a guy at the hospital, and we got together for drinks one night after work. One thing led to another and the next thing I knew I was at his place. We ended up having sex and we used protection. We tried to start a relationship, but realized we really weren't a good fit for each other.



*Symptoms of gonorrhea*

About six months later, I met a guy online and we started texting back and forth. This went on for weeks before we met in person. He seemed like a great match for me – super nice guy, great at listening and we had a lot in common. We ended up having sex after about 4 actual “in person” dates. The first time we did we were at my apartment, and I didn't have any condoms. Even though I was a nurse, I knew this, I knew better, it was the dumbest decision of my life. We had unprotected sex. I had never asked him to get tested for STIs and we had never talked about it. He seemed like such a nice guy I assumed he was clean and hadn't been with many people.

The next week I had a routine appointment with my OB/GYN. She asked if I had been sexually active and if I wanted to get tested for STDs. I figured, why not, better to be safe so I said yes. Several days later I got a call from my doctor informing me that I had tested positive for gonorrhea.

What an absolute shock. So many emotions - I was devastated, hurt, and angry and disappointed in this new guy I had met online. I didn't have any symptoms, so if I hadn't been tested, I wouldn't have known until symptoms appeared. I was given strong antibiotics that eventually cleared it up.

So my advice to others? Don't trust everyone! Take control of your own health and get tested and make your partner get tested before you agree to be together. Don't give into your emotions. Trust your gut and be smart!"



*"I'm so glad I got tested because I didn't know I had it. I was about to start a new relationship so I was able to get it treated before I was able to spread it. Now I'm in a good relationship with a faithful boyfriend. We're safe!"*



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### **Who Should Get Tested for STIs?**

If you are sexually active, you should get tested for STIs. Also, get tested if:

- You're beginning a new relationship and may have sex soon
- Your partner will not be using a condom
- Your partner has been unfaithful
- You or your partner have chosen to have other sexual partners
- You have symptoms indicating you could have a STI.

### **What STIs Should You Test For?**

There are so many different STIs, it is hard to know what you may have been exposed to. Discuss it with your OB/GYN and they will encourage you to be tested for some or all of the following STIs:

- HIV
- Gonorrhea
- Chlamydia
- Hepatitis B
- Syphilis
- Trichomoniasis
- Herpes

## **Talk to Your OB/GYN**

If you visit your OB/GYN for our annual exam, don't assume they automatically test for STIs. Be open and honest with your OB/GYN and let them know if you have been sexually active or may have been exposed to an STI. Let them know if you have had multiple partners or anal sex since it puts you at higher risk for STIs.

Take charge of your own health and have confidence to request STI testing. OB/GYN offices test for STIs all day long – it is very routine and a completely normal request.

It is important to get tested for STIs if you are pregnant to protect your baby. Your OB/GYN should test for STIs at your first OB visit, and again near the end of pregnancy. It is very important to get tested if you have been a victim of sexual violence or assault. If you are a survivor of sexual violence, seek the help of a counselor and see an OB/GYN for an exam and STI testing.

If you have experienced sexual assault, there are organizations that offer support such as the National Sexual Assault Hotline with a 24/7 support hotline: 1-800-656-4673. They will also help you find local support if needed.

Several STIs are “notifiable” diseases. This means that healthcare providers are legally required to report the positive results to government officials at the Public Health Department. Public Health officials keep track of STI/STD statistics, so we are aware of the number of cases and if the public is at risk. Since they have been tracking these statistics, we are aware of the current sharp rise in STDs in the country, and especially in Georgia.

The notifiable STDs that get reported to the health department are: chlamydia, gonorrhea, HIV, syphilis, hepatitis, and chancroid. STIs are tested with blood and urine tests.

Your doctor can order urine or blood tests to check for:

- HIV
- Syphilis
- Gonorrhea
- Chlamydia

It may also take a month or longer after being exposed to certain STIs for blood tests to be reliable. For example, if someone gets HIV, it may not be detected by tests for weeks or months.

**Swabs** - Testing for STIs can also be done by cervical, or urethral swabs in your vagina.

**Pap smears and HPV testing** - A Pap smear is a test that looks for early signs of cervical or anal cancer. It is not a STI test. To check for HPV, your OB/GYN will order a separate HPV test.

**Physical examination** - OB/GYNs can diagnose some STIs, such as genital warts or herpes by physical examination. During the exam, the doctor can look for sores, bumps, and other signs of STIs. They can also take samples from any questionable areas to send off for testing.

It's important to discuss any noticeable changes with your doctor. Let them know if you've noticed any changes on or around your genitals, anus or rectum.

### **When to See an OB/GYN**

It's important to see an OB/GYN and discuss any noticeable changes with your doctor. Let them know if you've noticed any changes on or around your genitals, anus or rectum.

Although some STDs may not have symptoms, it's still important to watch for any signs of infection, even if they are very mild.

### **See an OB/GYN immediately if you notice any of these symptoms:**

- An unusual discharge from the vagina
- Changes in urination
- Genital itching
- Genital burning
- Sores, rashes and bumps
- Pelvic pain
- Pain in the lower abdomen
- Painful sex
- Abnormal vaginal bleeding

## **Can I Get a Home STI Test?**

Online tests are also available for some STIs, but they aren't always reliable. Your safest bet is to see a doctor for testing and if you are positive, you can get treatment.

What should you do if you test positive for an STD:

If you get a positive STI/STD test result, follow up with your OB/GYN for treatment. Make sure you let any recent sex partners know of your diagnosis since they will most likely need treatment also.

Discuss with your OB/GYN any concerns and they will answer your questions. You will need to be aware of any future problems to watch for, such as pelvic inflammatory disease, infertility, or future outbreaks. You will need to learn of all the risk factors and potential problems.

Also, depending on the STD, you will need to inform every future partner that you had a sexually transmitted disease so that they will know if they are also at risk.



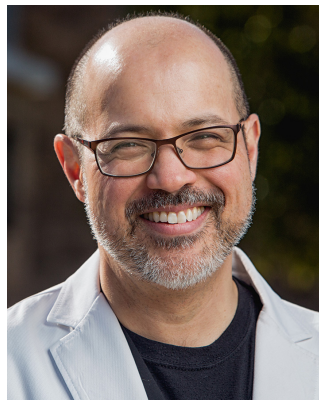
## Final Thoughts

The best protection for yourself to avoid STDs is to abstain from sex. This includes all types, vaginal, anal and oral. Make wise choices for yourself and be mindful to protect your own health.

If and when you choose to be in a sexual relationship, get tested before having sex with anyone new. And communicate with them and make sure they are tested too. In order to take control of your own body, insist that your partner be tested. You have a right to protect yourself and have enough self-confidence and self-worth to demand it. Smart women stand up for themselves.

Once you are in a relationship, decide and agree on mutual monogamy with a trustworthy partner. If you notice any red flags, speak up and don't back down. You are worthy of a partner who respects you, values you and will not want to harm you. If you suspect they are being unfaithful, get tested again. Use condoms. They are not 100% effective at preventing STDs, but they can make an enormous difference. If condoms aren't available, wait it out. Your health and your life is more important than anything temporary.

Visit your OB/GYN annually (or more) for pelvic exams, pap smears, and STI testing. Pay attention to your body and pay attention to any and all changes. If you have any questions or concerns, see your OB/GYN.



Dr. Mike Litrel of Cherokee Women's Health Specialists  
Cherokee County Board of Health Chairman 2001-2013; Board member 2013-current  
The Hope Center for Pregnancy Crisis, Medical Director 2006-current  
Cherokee County Health Department, Director of Women's Health Services 1999-2010

**“Practice abstinence. Use condoms. If you do choose to have sex,  
get tested and make sure your partner is tested. Then remain monogamous.  
That is the only way to reduce the spread.”**

- Dr. Mike Litrel