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Take steps to prevent sexually transmitted diseases

Throughout April, designated as National Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) awareness month, the Sarasota County Health Department urges residents of all ages to take steps to reduce their risk for these diseases -- chlamydia, herpes, gonorrhea, syphilis, human papillomavirus (HPV), human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), AIDS and others.

“We have increased outreach in the community through additional education presentations and screenings,” said Gary Ervin, team leader for the STD program at the Sarasota County Health Department. “Our intent is to empower people to recognize signs and symptoms, take personal responsibility to reduce their risk and prevent the spread of STDs, and seek treatment when needed.”

Testing and treatment for STDs is available at each of the three Sarasota County Health Department clinic locations in Sarasota (Ringling Boulevard site), Venice and North Port.

Chlamydia is the most commonly reported STD in Sarasota County and is more likely to infect young people ages 15-24. Syphilis is also on the rise locally. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), those who have had a sexually transmitted infection are 2-5 times more likely to contract HIV, the virus that can cause AIDS.

Health department officials say that sexually transmitted infections can occur in anyone, regardless of income or socioeconomic status. If STDs are untreated, they can contribute to long-term health problems. These infections may go undiagnosed and untreated because some people may not have obvious signs or symptoms. However, untreated STDs can cause irreversible neurological damage and damage to the reproductive organs, which can result in infertility. Physical exams and certain lab tests can reveal STD and HIV infections. Early detection and treatment of STDs reduces the risk of pelvic inflammatory disease, which may affect fertility in women. In addition, some strains of HPV are closely linked to cervical cancer and can be prevented through vaccination.

Public health officials encourage everyone to take these steps to prevent STDs:

1. Talk with your partner and health care provider about ways to reduce risk of infection, and about recommended vaccinations and testing.
2. Get Tested. Visit findSTDtest.org to find a test site near you.
3. Treatment – Seek out medical care to treat the disease and to prevent future infections.

To schedule a community presentation or for more information about STDs, please call 941-861-2919 or visit a new site that has been launched by the Florida Department of Health, www.faceitflorida.com. The CDC also has a Web site, <http://www.cdc.gov/STD/sam/default.htm>, which includes podcasts and social media resources.

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