College students and STIs [1]

1) Hey Alice,

What are the most common STDs among college students?

2) Alice,

What are the average number of STDs on college campuses and the most common ones?

Answer

Dear Readers,

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), or now more commonly known as sexually transmitted infections (STIs), are infections spread through sexual activity or behavior. Most undergraduate college students fall between the ages of 15 to 24, which is the age group most susceptible to new STIs. It can be hard to report on the exact number of STIs on college campuses as it can vary so greatly between schools and that information is often not reported publicly. However, what is known is the overall prevalence rate among people that are college-aged. In fact, people in this age group acquire almost half of all new STIs every year, with individuals aged 20 to 24 accounting for the highest infection rates. Many factors may contribute to this phenomenon, including lack of sex education, insufficient access to safer sex materials, inability to pay for testing and treatment, unfamiliarity or discomfort with sexual health resources and services, and concerns regarding confidentiality. However, STI risk reduction, treatment, and care are all more easily manageable with access to accurate information.

It’s good to note that STIs affect individuals of all backgrounds, races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and ages, and that the prevalence or rate of STIs tends to vary between different demographics. With that said, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the following STIs are relatively common among college-aged young adults:

- **Chlamydia** is the most commonly reported bacterial STI in the United States. There are about 1.6 million reported cases annually, but the number of total cases each year may be as high as 2.9 million. Chlamydia tends to be underreported as many people with it are asymptomatic or may not get tested. This STI is most common among young adults, with
15- to 24-year-olds accounting for about two-thirds of new chlamydia infections. The CDC estimates that about five percent of sexually active females between the ages of 14 to 24 have chlamydia.

- **Gonorrhea**, another bacterial STI, affects teens and young adults at higher rates than other age groups. The prevalence ranges from about 0.5 to 0.6 percent for those aged 15 to 24. In addition, gonorrhea infection rates have been on the rise in recent years.
- **Syphilis** [2], a bacterial infection, presents in several stages: primary, secondary, and late or latent stages. Syphilis isn’t as common as some other STIs, but infection rates have recently been on the rise for all ages older than 15 and for every race and ethnicity. In 2016, there were about 88,000 new syphilis diagnoses reported.
- **Trichomoniasis vaginalis** [3], commonly referred to as “trich,” is a parasitic STI that’s treated with antibiotics. There are limited national statistics on this STI, but estimates range from about 3 to 13 percent for trich prevalence and 139,000 initial visits to health care providers for it each year.
- **Herpes** [4] is a virus that exists as several different strains. Herpes simplex virus 1 (HSV-1 or oral herpes) and Herpes simplex virus 2 (HSV-2 or genital herpes) are common among the young adult population. Almost half of people aged 14 to 49 have HSV-1, and about twelve percent of this age group has HSV-2. The prevalence of both HSV-1 and HSV-2 increases with age, and tends to be higher among females.
- **Human papillomavirus (HPV)** affects millions of people; there are approximately 14 million new cases of it every year. Overall, there are about 79 million people in the US with this viral infection. It’s also responsible for thousands of cases of cancer each year. Fortunately, the HPV vaccine, which is recommended for everyone under the age of 26, protects against nine strains of the virus.
- **Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)** [5] affects about 1.1 million people in the United States. Teens and young adults aged 13 to 24 account for about 22 percent of all new HIV cases.

Many STIs are able to remain dormant and asymptomatic for years after infection occurs. This is true for both bacterial and viral infections. For example, up to 90 percent of individuals infected with HSV-1 or HSV-2 never exhibit symptoms. Some STIs may have negative long-term impacts on reproductive health if left untreated or if they progress to a more severe stage. Here are some tips to help prevent and manage STIs:

- With each new sex partner, it’s helpful to discuss STI status [6] and get tested before engaging in any sexual activity. If you’re diagnosed with an STI, it’s critical to notify your current and previous partners so that they may get tested and treated if needed. Likewise, if a partner informs you that they have an STI, it’s best to seek testing and treatment.
- The CDC suggests that those with vaginas and uteruses and are 25 or younger get tested annually for chlamydia. Untreated cases may lead to pelvic inflammatory disease (PID) and other serious health issues.
- Staying on top of vaccinations can help protect against HPV and many other infections spread through human contact.
- Practice safer sex habits [7] that are most compatible with your body, lifestyle, cultural or religious background, and partner(s).

A health care provider can help you decide how to treat the infection, and many STIs, including
chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, may go away with antibiotics. If you think you might have an STI, find a clinic in your area [8] for testing and treatment. Although there is no cure for herpes, there are prescription medicines that help reduce the frequency and severity of HSV-1 and HSV-2 breakouts. If you’re still curious about STIs, try exploring the Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) [9] category of the Go Ask Alice! Sexual and Reproductive Health [10] archives, or check out the CDC's STD Fact Sheets [11].

Hope this helps!

Alice!

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Published date:
Dec 17, 1999

Last reviewed on:
May 04, 2018
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