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STD Rates During COVID-19 Pandemic are Concerning

The most recent data available suggests reported cases of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) have declined. This may sound like good news, but experts at University of California San Diego AntiViral Research Center say that the drop in reported STD rates may be the result of decreased testing during COVID-19 restrictions and could rise again as restrictions are lifted.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there are approximately 20 million new cases of STDs in the United States annually.

We asked Susan Little, MD, an infectious disease specialist at UC San Diego Health, to explain the connection between the COVID-19 pandemic, decreased sexual encounters, the use of sexual health services and the possible increase in STDs.

Question: What trends are you seeing in STD rates?

Answer: For the past five years, STDs have been on the rise in San Diego. Residents of the San Diego metropolitan area were diagnosed with chlamydia at a rate of 686.3 per 100,000 people. The current burden of STDs in San Diego County is the highest it has been for the past two decades.

Although the rate of HIV infection has improved in recent years to 13 per 100,000 people, there are still hundreds of San Diegans diagnosed with the virus

annually. Shockingly, roughly 1 in 7 people in the United States live with HIV unknowingly, according to hiv.gov.

Q: What impact has the COVID-19 pandemic had on STDs?

A: The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in decreased access to STD testing – both from clinic closures and testing supplies that were diverted to COVID-19 testing. The addition of stay-at-home orders and social distancing restrictions likely resulted in decreased rates of STD exposure. Finally, individuals have been avoiding visits to hospitals and clinics out of fear of contracting the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19.

Q: What can we do to combat STD and HIV infections?

A: We must educate our citizens on STDs and HIV, particularly in marginalized communities where the profound and longstanding effects of stigma and discrimination have discouraged people from seeking sexual health care. Today, San Diego's highest risk populations for HIV are Latino, Black, Gen Z and persons assigned male at birth having sex with other persons assigned male at birth.

If STDs and HIV have taught us anything, it is about the complexities of stigma – the intersectional, social and ecological effects that can be driven by misinformation and inequitable systems and social norms. It is for this reason we need to reframe public conversations around sexual health, choosing science-backed data and supportive language that corrects the fear-mongering discourse that shrouds these infections.

[The Good to Go clinic](#) through UC San Diego School of Medicine's AntiViral Research Center has launched the [Facts Over Fear campaign](#) with local nonprofits to foster healthy conversations on STD testing, prevention and treatment. The goal is to normalize conversations around sexual health and make regular testing a part of every San Diegans' self-care routine – just like getting your teeth cleaned at the dentist or taking a mental health day.

— *Yadira Galindo*

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