

Men's Health Month: STDs, real men get checked
By Brandy Gill, CRDAMC PAO

Many Soldiers are not aware that there are deadly enemies infiltrating their ranks, silently preying on their general health and ability to reproduce, and in some cases even taking their lives.

Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are well-known threats. Still, regardless of the danger they pose, many men (and women) don't take them seriously.

According to the Centers for Disease Control website, STD cases soar into the millions every year, and they are a major public health concern.

"In total, CDC estimates that there are approximately 19 million new STD infections each year, which cost the U.S. healthcare system \$16.4 billion annually and cost individuals even more in terms of acute and long-term health consequences," it says.

The website goes on to say this number, while shocking, isn't really an accurate estimate of the number of new STD cases seen each year because several types of STDs are excluded.

"The U.S. CDC's surveillance report includes data on the three STDs that physicians are required to report to the agency – Chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis – which represent only a fraction of the true burden of STDs," according to the website.

Young adults between the ages of 20 to 24 are at the highest risk for contracting STDs, with 15 to 19 year-olds following closely behind. This means the majority of Fort Hood Soldiers are considered to be at high risk for contracting sexually transmitted diseases.

In fact, about 3,000 new STD cases are seen every year at the Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center Communicable Disease Clinic, Rosa Vega, chief of the communicable disease clinic said.

"We see about 250 new positive, reportable (STD) cases every month," she said. "The most common types are Chlamydia, gonorrhea, HPV (human papillomavirus, syphilis, but we also see Soldiers and their family members for HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) HIV notification, counseling and case management.

Of the estimated 650 clinic visits a month, 75 percent of the clinic visits are active duty and twenty five percent are family members. About 75 to 80 percent of the clinic visits are male.

"The reason we see more men than women is because women get tested for sexually transmitted diseases when they get their annual pap smear, and they are treated by their primary care physicians," she said. "But men are not tested, not even at their annual physicals, unless they request it."

The lack of required annual testing coupled with the fact many infected men never have any symptoms means they are more likely to suffer the long-term effects of STDs which in rare cases may include sterility, damage to the brain or internal organs or even death.

Another reason for men to get tested is that if they do not know they have and STD, especially syphilis, they can hurt their partner and their future children. The CDC said the number of syphilis cases has been rising throughout the population since 2000 and at an even higher rate in black men since 2004.

“Each year, STDs cause at least 24,000 women in the U.S. to become infertile. Untreated syphilis can lead to serious long-term complications, including brain, cardiovascular and organ damage,” the CDC website states. “Syphilis in pregnant women can also result in congenital syphilis (syphilis among infants), which can cause stillbirth, death soon after birth, and physical deformity and neurological complications in children who survive. Untreated syphilis in pregnant women results in infant death in up to 40 percent of cases.”

Vega said new testing methods for men make detection and treatment easy and painless.

“The major types of STDs can be detected with a simple blood or urine test,” she said. “These new methods have made the older and more invasive tests unnecessary, and many STDs can be treated with antibiotics.”

However, there are several other types of STDs that have no known cure like herpes or HIV.

“We can’t cure these STDs, but medication can reduce symptoms,” Vega said. “Still if you have been diagnosed with either of these you should always wear a condom even if you aren’t currently experiencing symptoms.”

HPV, while not a curable STD, is now highly preventable with early intervention Vega said.

“One in four people who have sex have some form of HPV, but a new immunization has been developed that prevents the four most common strands of HPV which have been linked to 70 percent of cervical cancer cases and 90 percent of genital warts” she said. “The immunization is given to males and females usually between the ages of eleven to 26 year old. It is most effective if it’s given before a person becomes sexually active.”

The bottom line, Vega said, is that if you are sexually active you have to step up, talk to your provider and take care of yourself.

“If they engage in any activity that is risky, if they aren’t following the ABCs, abstinence, be monogamous and correct and consistent condom use, then they should discuss it with their partner. Soldiers should request a STD workup at their annual physical or come to our clinic for testing,” she said.

The CRDAMC Communicable Disease clinic provides education, testing, counseling, treatment, and STD prevention education to military units, and the Fort Hood community. Referrals from all primary care providers are accepted, or Soldiers and family members can call the clinic at 254-285-6340 or 553-3116 directly to make an appointment.

