

Keep yourself and your Valentine healthy

By Stacie Pannell

With Valentine's Day coming up this week, let's take a moment to reflect on the importance of caring for ourselves and our partners. As a public health nurse who works to prevent communicable diseases – especially sexually transmitted infections – I want to raise awareness about the importance of STI testing and transparency in relationships.

The sweet sentiments of candy hearts are merely words like "Be Mine," "Kiss Me" and "True Love". Getting tested for STIs is more important than words. Testing is a true act of love and responsibility. It fosters a healthy, trusting relationship to ensure the well-being of both partners.

STIs are diverse and you don't know what diseases you are going to get. Comprehensive testing is the key to understanding and addressing our sexual health.

1,000% rise in syphilis

Public health professionals encourage all people who are now or have ever been sexually active to prioritize their well-being by seeking testing that includes screening for syphilis. That disease that has increased rapidly in our community. Chlamydia continues to be the most common infection, with gonorrhea a close second. But syphilis has increased about 1,000% (yes, one thousand percent) since 2021.

All these STIs are bacterial infections that can be cured with the right treatment. Most medical clinics can provide testing for them as well as HIV, hepatitis C and B, and herpes, which are viruses.

Protecting babies

Montana has seen a significant increase in congenital syphilis cases, too. Congenital syphilis happens when someone who is pregnant is infected with syphilis and doesn't receive timely treatment. This may lead to stillbirth. If the baby survives, he or she may have severe disabilities such as deformed bones, severe anemia, enlarged liver and spleen, jaundice, nerve problems causing blindness or deafness, meningitis and skin rashes.

Congenital syphilis can be prevented with early detection through prenatal care. Prenatal care includes routine testing for all STIs. If syphilis is detected, treatment is given to prevent infection of the baby.

Because of the rise in syphilis cases, it is recommended that healthcare providers test for this disease whenever they test for other STIs. Be sure to tell your doctor that you want to be tested for syphilis.

Many cases of syphilis can be treated effectively with a single dose of the proper antibiotic.

We need to break down the stigma surrounding STIs to foster open conversations about sexual health. We understand that discussing STI testing might be uncomfortable. Yet it's a conversation worth having for the sake of your health and the health of those you care about. It is imperative for individuals to take charge of their sexual health. Early detection is crucial. By getting tested regularly, you can prevent the spread of STIs and protect your community.

Make a commitment to yourself and your loved ones; prioritize your health. Reach out to your local healthcare provider or visit a nearby clinic for confidential and comprehensive STI testing. When you celebrate Valentine's Day, give yourself and your partner the gift of health and safety.

Stacie Pannell, RN, manages the communicable disease prevention program at RiverStone Health. For information about confidential STI testing and treatment, call RiverStone Health at 406-247-3305.