

Dating while you have an STD - CNN

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It's a conversation that people with sexually transmitted diseases or STDs, also referred to as sexually transmitted infections or STIs -- such as herpes, chlamydia or HIV -- have been having for years. Meanwhile, their numbers are growing. Today, an estimated 1 in 2 sexually active Americans will contract an STD by the time they turn 25.

"The stigma associated with having an STI leads folks to believe that they won't be able to date and that no one will want to have sex with them, but in my experience, that's rarely the case," said Jenelle Marie Pierce, executive director of the [STD Project](#) and spokeswoman for PositiveSingles.com, a dating website aimed at people with STDs. "Sure, some people experience rejection after disclosing to a new partner. But most people find that the stigma itself is far worse than the infection."

I asked Pierce and other experts to share more insights on dating when you have an STD.

When should you tell a potential partner that you have an STD?

"When first dating someone, most people want to put their best foot forward and disclose information about themselves over time and as comfort, trust and feelings develop," sex therapist Diane Gleim said. "Depending on your preference and your feelings about the person you're dating, you may want to lead with your STI status or not. Either approach is OK, but not disclosing your status as sexual activity becomes clearly imminent is not OK."

In other words, you don't need to have this conversation on your first date (unless you want to), but you should absolutely tell your partner before you become sexually intimate with them.

"It's super important to make your STI status known prior to having sex with someone new," sex educator Heather Alberda said. "Setting the stage for healthy communication starts on day one."

Josh Robbins, an HIV/AIDS activist and spokesman for another dating website, DatingPositives.com, said that "all you can do is be safe. Being safe means taking personal responsibility and getting tested regularly in order to be up to date on the status of your health."

"But it's also about being honest about your sexual health, and the longer you wait to tell someone you're positive, the harder it will be. Sadly, there may be people who are too afraid to admit they have a condition because they fear rejection. That fear comes from stigma, which can only be reduced by educating people and accepting as a society that STIs are very, very common."

How should you tell a potential partner about your STD status?

It's best to approach the conversation pragmatically and succinctly in a safe space with few distractions, Pierce said. "Give the person space and let them take a day or two to circle back with questions. And try your best not to take their response personally."

And for people with STDs who want to skip the uncomfortable conversation -- and get right to all the other wonderfully awkward aspects of dating -- websites like PositiveSingles.com and DatingPositives.com offer a way to do just that. "When folks are initially diagnosed, they are absolutely petrified of disclosing to a new partner, if they even want to date at all, so sometimes, a dating site can really help," Pierce explained.

Sex therapist Rachel Needle offers this advice: "First, make sure you tell them in person, face-to-face. Be prepared to educate your partner about the STI you have, including ways you can be sexually active and reduce the chance of transmission. If you feel comfortable, you can share with them how you contracted the STI and how, if at all, it has impacted you. Allow your partner to ask any questions they have and provide them with good resources to learn more on their own."

What should someone expect when disclosing STD status?

"People who have long-term STIs always expect the worst when disclosing their status, but I want to challenge them to also only accept the best," Pierce said. "While everyone isn't going to be excited that you have an STI, a calm, kind and thoughtful response is what should happen when you disclose to a new person. If they are hysterical, cruel or disrespectful, then walk away."

Robbins agreed. "I've found that refusing to pursue someone's approval or acceptance of my chronic condition is the way to go," he explained. "Attempting to validate myself through another person's acceptance is pointless. Instead, I view being open about my journey as a privilege I extend to a potential partner. Their reaction will determine whether or not I want them to be in my life."

The sex educator known as Laureen HD added that "potential partners tend to ask 'what happened?' after you disclose that you have an STI. And a common mistake -- at least, I consider it a mistake -- that people with herpes make is to feel that they owe potential partners an explanation on how they contracted herpes, as if contracting it from a cheating boyfriend versus from a one night stand makes a difference.

"I did an experiment where I used Tinder for a month, where the only thing my bio read was 'I have genital herpes, swipe right only if you're cool with it.' I didn't know what to expect, but my fearful self, brainwashed by the stigma, anticipated that there was going to be a lot of slut-shaming or rude interactions. But none of that happened. Most guys who swiped right were genuinely appreciative of how upfront I was about the information, and

a few were even down to meet up and get to know each other in person. This taught me that we are more understanding of STIs in the privacy of our relationships than we are in public conversations."

What should people without STDs know about dating someone who's positive?

Many people may just assume that they're negative and have not been tested for STDs. The experts I contacted point out that someone who knows that they have an STD is more likely to be aware of their sexual health. "People who are openly STD-positive are the people you should least fear," Robbins said. "It's the people who say they're negative -- but maybe they're only assumed negative or maybe they've just never been tested -- who actually pose the most risk."

It's also worth educating yourself about that risk. "A once-daily preventive medication called PrEP is now available for people who are in a relationship with someone who is HIV-positive," Alberda said. "We also know now that if viral loads are undetectable, HIV is unable to be passed along to a partner."

Sex therapist Michael Vigorito explained, "Studies show a decrease in HIV infections associated with two medical advances: taking a pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for those who are HIV negative and 'undetectable = untransmittable' for those who are positive. My clients share that these interventions decrease their anxieties about HIV infection or transmission and allow them to enjoy their sexuality more fully."

It's clear that having an STD doesn't have to put an end to dating or sex. Just like safe sex, it's one more topic you'll want to discuss with a new partner before getting intimate.

"When I got diagnosed with genital herpes, which is an incurable STI, it felt like going back to teenage years and having to learn how to date all over again," Lauren HD said. "How to make myself look approachable without coming off as easy or promiscuous, how to build self-confidence to put myself out there again, how to not fall for the first person who would fall for me in light of my disclosure, etc."

"After my first rejection, I remember thinking, 'That's it, I won't ever be able to be in a relationship anymore. I won't ever be a wife. I won't ever be a mom.' Those fears and insecurities even lead me to neglect letting some partners know of my diagnosis in a timely way. But a lot of trial and error later, I figured I would rather be rejected while having done the right thing than accepted but having neglected their consent. The emotional fragility never vanishes completely, even after getting many positive responses."

Ian Kerner is a licensed couples therapist, writer and contributor on the topic of sex for CNN.