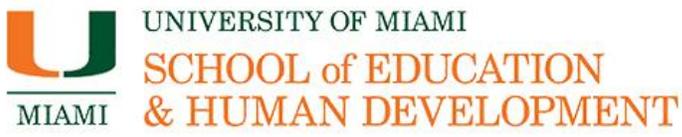


# VALENTINE'S DAY FACT SHEET ON SEXUAL HEALTH

A Fact Sheet Prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families

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## Executive Summary

What do you plan to give your valentine this February 14 – a bouquet of flowers, a heart-shaped box of chocolates, a candlelit dinner? Have you considered the gift that keeps on giving -- a sexually transmitted infection? Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections that result from the transmission of certain bacteria or viruses during physically intimate acts. An STI may or may not result in a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that has noticeable symptoms.

Just in time for this romantic holiday, CCF's Adina Nack, a sociology professor at California Lutheran University, dispels STI/STD myths, updates us on the facts, and gives practical advice for how to avoid STIs 365 days a year. The idea is that for Valentines Day you can give love and keep your sexual well-being.

As Dr. Nack explains, "It may seem unromantic to raise the issue of STIs on a day that celebrates love and romance. But let's be realistic: love and romance tend to lead to sex in U.S. society today. And STIs have reached epidemic proportions in America, with 19 million new cases occurring each year. So what are the odds of contracting one of these infections? A 2000 study estimated that a third of Americans had contracted a STI by age 24."

In a fact sheet prepared for the Council on Contemporary Families, Dr. Nack, author of *Damaged Goods? Women Living with Incurable Sexually Transmitted Diseases* (Temple University Press, 2008), reviews six myths about sexually transmitted infections by updating readers on the research on topics ranging from "technical virginity" to what "safer sex" does and does not mean.

Virginia Rutter  
Board Member  
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## Valentine's Day Fact Sheet on Sexual Health

Adina Nack  
California Lutheran University

What do you plan to give your valentine this February 14<sup>th</sup> – a bouquet of flowers, a heart-shaped box of chocolates, a candlelit dinner? Have you considered the gift that keeps on giving -- a sexually transmitted infection? Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are infections that result from the transmission of certain bacteria or viruses during physically intimate acts. An STI may or may not result in a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that has noticeable symptoms.

It may seem unromantic to raise the issue of STIs on a day that celebrates love and romance. But let's be realistic: love and romance tend to lead to sex in U.S. society today. And STIs have reached epidemic proportions in America, with 19 million new cases occurring each year. So what are the odds of becoming infected? A 2000 report estimated that a third of Americans had contracted a STI by age 24.

This is why a holiday focused on love, romance, and seduction should also be a time to focus on sexual health. Researchers have discovered much useful information about STIs, but many people continue to avoid learning about these socially taboo infections. Whether or not sex is part of your plans for this Valentine's Day, consider these myths and facts about STIs:

**1. Virgins do not have to worry about STIs.** The validity of this argument depends solely upon one's definition of virginity. Many define virginity as not having had penile-vaginal intercourse, but still engage in other behaviors that can transmit STIs: e.g., oral sex, anal sex, and even non-penetrative skin-to-skin contact. Recent studies of college students reveal that less than 50% consider oral sex to be "sex," and 24% considered anal intercourse to be an "abstinent behavior." A longitudinal study released in 2005 found that teens who took a 'virginity pledge' were almost as likely to contract a STI as those who did not pledge – partly because 13% of those who pledged to protect their 'technical' virginity ended up engaging in oral and anal sex as opposed to only 2% of those who had not pledged.

**2. Only certain types of people get STIs.** People often think that infections occur only to individuals who are promiscuous, irresponsible, immoral, or unclean. But STIs are "equal opportunity" pathogens, infecting a wide range of people, from "technical virgins" to those who have had many sexual partners. A 2008 CDC report said that 14-19 year-old females have a 20% chance of contracting a STI from their first sexual partner. "Screening" your partner for morality, responsibility, cleanliness, or even "virginity" will not eliminate STI risk.

**3. People know if they are infected.** High-school health classes typically feature slideshow photos of the worst-case infections, leaving many thinking that the absence of an oozing

sore or a cauliflower-shaped growth of warts means the absence of any infection. But in 2007 there were 1.4 million new cases of Chlamydia and Gonorrhea in the U.S. These infections are usually asymptomatic, but they may have serious consequences for women: pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), chronic pelvic pain, ectopic pregnancy, and ultimately infertility.

**4. Regular annual medical exams and HIV testing eliminates the need to worry about STIs.** Do not assume that you are being tested for all STIs when you go in for your exam. A survey of US physicians found that less than one-third conducted routine STI screenings of their patients. Even of those tested, half of U.S. adults (18-44 years old) have only been tested for HIV and not for any other STI. Furthermore, there are no definitive tests for either human papillomavirus (HPV) or herpes simplex virus (HSV) in the absence of noticeable symptoms.

**5. Condoms eliminate the need to worry about STIs.** HIV/AIDS public health campaigns and educational programs have succeeded in promoting the use of latex (male) condoms as the “safer sex” norm. And the correct and consistent use of condoms has been shown to be highly effective in decreasing the transmission of HIV and many other STIs. However, two medically incurable STIs, HPV and HSV, are transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, which can occur even when latex condoms are used correctly. Current estimates are that 50-75% of adult Americans have had genital HPV infections in their lifetime and about 20% have genital herpes infections.

**6. Having the ‘STI talk’ is unromantic.** Contracting a STI, especially a medically incurable one, is far less romantic than even the most uncomfortable conversation about sexual health. Communicating honestly with one’s partner about past sexual experiences and sexual health issues, sharing test results, and talking through the ways to incorporate healthy behaviors into one’s sex life are the foundation of a healthy sexual relationship. Relationships often become stronger and more intimate – and they are certainly safer – when people find the courage to open up.

Setting the stage for a romantic and sexy Valentine’s Day requires more than flowers, chocolates, or champagne. A sexually *healthy* celebration of love requires education, testing, and communication. Make sure you have the gift of knowledge on Valentine’s Day.

## For Further Information on Related Topics

### **On definitions of virginity**

Bersamin, M. et al. (2007). Defining Virginity and Abstinence: Adolescents' Interpretations of Sexual Behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41(2): 182-188.

### **On STI stereotypes**

Nack, A (2002). Bad Girls and Fallen Women: Chronic STD Diagnoses as Gateways to Tribal Stigma. *Symbolic Interaction*, 25 (4): 463-485.

[http://www.ashastd.org/news/news\\_pressreleases\\_CDCsurveillancereport.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/news/news_pressreleases_CDCsurveillancereport.cfm).

### **On U.S. STI rates of infection**

<http://www.cdc.gov/std/stats07/toc.htm>

[http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn\\_hpv\\_facts.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_hpv_facts.cfm)

[http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes\\_learn.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes_learn.cfm)

### **On U.S. STI and HIV testing rates**

[http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn\\_statistics.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_statistics.cfm)

St Lawrence JS et al. (2002). STD screening, testing, case reporting, and clinical and partner notification practices: a national survey of US physicians. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92: 1784-1788.

### **On testing for HSV and HPV**

[http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes\\_learn\\_testing.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes_learn_testing.cfm)

[http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn\\_hpv\\_warts.cfm#6](http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_hpv_warts.cfm#6)

### **On prevalence rates of HSV and HPV**

[http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn\\_hpv\\_facts.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/learn/learn_hpv_facts.cfm)

[http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes\\_learn.cfm](http://www.ashastd.org/herpes/herpes_learn.cfm)

For the names of U.S.-based researchers who can discuss new findings about the impacts of sexually transmitted infections on intimate relationships, contact Stephanie Coontz, Director of Research and Public Education at the Council on Contemporary Families, [coontzs@msn.com](mailto:coontzs@msn.com), 360-556-9223.

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## About CCF

The Council on Contemporary Families is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to providing the press and public with the latest research and best-practice findings about American families. Our members include demographers, economists, family therapists, historians, political scientists, psychologists, social workers, sociologists, as well as other family social scientists and practitioners.

Founded in 1996 and now based in the School of Education and Human Development at the University of Miami, the Council's mission is to enhance the national understanding of how and why contemporary families are changing, what needs and challenges they face, and how these needs can best be met. To fulfill that mission, the Council holds annual conferences, open to the public, and issues periodic briefing papers and fact sheets.

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