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STD Testing Helps Prevent Outbreaks

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Disease prevention and control are cornerstones of public health. Currently, health officials in Whiteside County are working diligently to control an outbreak of gonorrhea (a bacterial infection transmitted through sexual contact) in their jurisdiction. Here in Lee County, we have had 4 reports of gonorrhea thus far in 2007. This is about average for us for most years; however an outbreak could occur anywhere at any time. This is one reason that testing is so important.

Disease screening is one of the most basic tools of modern public health and preventive medicine. In the case of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), screening can detect infections and in many cases allow for treatment and cure. This is a form of prevention, because the treatment prevents the disease from further spread.

Not all STDs are curable. Viral STDs such as the human papilloma virus (HPV), genital herpes, and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) are treatable, but not curable. HPV may be cleared from the body over time, but in some people can lead to cervical or penile cancer. HIV, as many of you know, can lead to Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Bacterial infections such as gonorrhea, Chlamydia, and syphilis are curable with the appropriate antibiotics. The Lee County Health Department has a communicable disease program which provides a variety of services, including the prevention and control of STDs through testing, treatment, referral, contact tracing, and education.

Although Gonorrhea has been in the local news of late, the most commonly occurring STD locally and nationally is Chlamydia. In 2006, there were 53 reported cases of Chlamydia in Lee County and 76 cases the year before. One reason for this fact is that often, people can be infected with Chlamydia without symptoms and therefore pass it on to a partner without knowing it. If left untreated, Chlamydia and other STDs can lead to serious and sometimes permanent bodily damage. Any individual who thinks he or she may have been exposed to an STD is encouraged to seek testing with their healthcare provider or through the health department.

The Lee County Health Department offers STD and HIV testing. Fees vary depending on age and county of residence. Call the department for specific fee information. STD testing is completely confidential while our HIV testing is anonymous. Don't hesitate to be tested if you think you may have been exposed. We are here to help. In addition to testing, we will also provide you with information to reduce your risk of further STD infections such as limiting your number of sexual partners, using condoms, etc. We provide confidential and nonjudgmental services. For additional information or to schedule an appointment, call (815) 284-3371.

-Submitted by Cathy Ferguson, M.P.H., Public Health Administrator