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Stigma and Information Gaps Contribute to Silence on Sexual Health Matters

New National Survey Finds Many Women Not Discussing HIV and Other Sexually Transmitted Diseases with Providers or Partners

NEW YORK, NY— Despite the high prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and growing impact of HIV infection among women, many women do not talk about these issues with their health care providers or partners. Perpetuating stereotypes and misperceptions compound the problem, according to the results of a new nationally representative survey released today by the Kaiser Family Foundation as part of a public education partnership with *SELF* magazine. The results are reported in a special report in the July issue (on newsstands June 22).

Approximately half of women, ages 18 to 49, report *never* having discussed HIV/AIDS, or other STDs, with a health care provider, far less than have talked about other health issues related to breast cancer or heart disease. And, one in six have at one point or another kept information about their sexual health from a provider. When it comes to talking with their partners, communication about sexual health is also scant. Many women – just about half – say they have *not* talked about HIV testing with their current partner, and even more – 60 percent – say they have *never* raised the topic of getting testing for other even more common STDs.

Among the most common reasons cited by women for not talking about these issues with providers or partners are: embarrassment or concern about being judged; not knowing what to ask or how to bring up the subject; and a belief that their health care provider or partner didn't need to know. When conversations do occur, women say the responsibility is more likely to fall to them to initiate versus their partners.

"Sexual health issues are a critical part of women's health, yet many women think STDs are something they just don't talk about – even with their partners, health care providers, or closest friends" said Tina Hoff, Vice President and Director of Entertainment Media Partnerships at the Kaiser Family Foundation. "The stigma associated with STDs silences women, making it more difficult for them to get the information and care they need to protect themselves."

"This is a call to action for all women," added Lucy Danziger, Editor-in-chief of *SELF* magazine. "Thanks to exhaustive media coverage we are aware of the dangers of heart disease and breast cancer, but every year millions of women are infected with STDs. Awareness could go a long way in stopping this. Communication with a sexual partner and your doctor is critical to protect your health and well being."

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The survey also reveals information gaps that may affect women's understanding of the impact HIV and other STDs have on them, and the importance of testing. Four in Five women underestimate or simply don't know the rates of STD infection in this country. It is estimated that as many as one in four Americans will get an STD at some point in their lifetime. Just under half of women believe they would *know* if they had an STD, this despite the fact that many STDs are asymptomatic. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, many of those who are infected don't know it.

Three in five women also don't realize the heightened risk for their gender. While the large majority know that STDs can cause problems with fertility and complications in pregnancy, nearly half are unaware that having an STD also increases risk for HIV infection, and 40 percent don't realize that STDs can lead to certain kinds of cancers (HPV, the human papilloma virus, is associated with cervical cancer).

While a majority of women surveyed report having ever been tested for HIV (64%) and/or other STDs (57%), at least some, in fact, may be mistaken in this assumption. Approximately 15 percent of those who report having been tested for HIV did *not* discuss the test with their health care provider, rather assumed it was just a routine part of care, as did 20 percent of those who reported having been tested for other STDs. There is also possible confusion about what a pap smear tests for: while most women know it is a screen for cervical cancer, 40 percent believe it tests for STDs, possibly because of the link between HPV and cervical cancer. To know for sure if you have been tested and for what, you must ask.

Women Taking Charge

When it comes to safeguarding their sexual health in the bedroom, many women are taking charge. Eight in 10 women have suggested to a partner using a condom, and seven in 10 have bought condoms themselves. Yet, stereotypes persist. While four in five women agree that a woman – or man – who carries a condom is “responsible,” half say having a condom ready implies promiscuity. Almost two in five women say they have been in a situation when they intended to use one but didn't, and a third report having a partner who tried to dissuade them.

The survey also finds that awareness and use of emergency contraception is increasing. Two-thirds (67%) of women in this survey are aware about the availability of “emergency contraceptive” methods used after sexual intercourse to prevent a pregnancy from occurring, up from just 51 percent three years ago when the Foundation last surveyed on the topic. Today, 6 percent of women report having ever used one of these back-up birth control methods, up from 2 percent in 2000. Younger women and those who are single are more likely to report use of emergency contraception.

Methodology

The Kaiser Family Foundation/*SELF* magazine *National Survey of Women on their Sexual Health* is a nationally representative survey of 800 women ages 18 to 49, designed by staff at the Foundation, *SELF*, and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) and conducted by telephone by PSRA between December 10, 2002, and January 19, 2003. The sample was designed to generalize to all women in continental U.S. telephone households. The margin of error is plus or minus 3.6 percent.

A report on the survey results appear in the July 2003 issue of *SELF* magazine. Individual copies of the complete survey report (#3341) are available on the Kaiser Family Foundation's Web site at www.kff.org. Copies of the special *SELF* Sexual Health Guide are available by contacting the Foundation. Multiple copies of the guide are available for educational use and distribution.

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