

"I Have an STD. Now What?"

When these women were diagnosed, there was anger, fear, guilt, and finally, acceptance. With total frankness, they relate what they went through.

**By Gail O'Connor**

• For young single-and-dating women, few things are as scary as finding out you have a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Of course there are the serious health risks: Human papillomavirus (HPV) is linked to cervical cancer, and such bacterial infections as chlamydia and gonorrhea, if left untreated, can cause infertility.

But what really terrifies women are the emotional and lifestyle implications of testing positive. This brings on a frightening sense of isolation; many women conclude that since they have an STD, they are somehow undatable and will never have another relationship. They also feel tainted, dirty, and ashamed.

With so many people being diagnosed every year—50 percent of all sexually active adults under 25 will have an STD at some point—Cosmo is joining the fight to erase the stigma and start letting women know that if it happens to them (despite being as careful as possible), they have no reason to feel alone or guilty.

To help us spread our message, two brave 20something women decided to step forward and reveal what it's really like to live with an STD. Here, they open up about the shock of the news, handling some intense emotions, and realizing that a positive result hardly means life is over.

## **Christin New, 22**

**A promising new relationship.** I'd always been careful about my health—my dad is a doctor, and my mom is a nurse—and I was aware of the harm STDs can do. So when I hit it off with a funny, smart guy back in early 2006, I insisted that we both be screened for a slew of STDs—including chlamydia, herpes, and HIV—before having sex. My results came back negative, and he said his did as well.

**Alarming symptoms.** For five months, we dated and slept together exclusively...or so I thought. One day, I noticed several small red bumps along my outer labia. I had recently shaved there, so I figured maybe they were ingrown hairs. But within a few days, the bumps grew and became round open sores that hurt when I touched them. As I checked them out with a hand mirror, a chill went through me, and I had a terrifying suspicion of what might be causing them.

**An emergency visit.** I went to my doctor immediately, and she examined the sores. She said there was a strong possibility they were genital herpes, but she advised me not to panic, so I didn't. She then took a skin test and a blood test and told me the results would be back

in three days.

**Tests confirm the worst.** My doctor looked so sad as she broke the news that I had herpes simplex virus type 2 (the often more severe kind of herpes that usually affects the genitals, as opposed to herpes simplex virus type 1, which is much more common around the mouth).

I immediately burst into tears in her office. After she prescribed a course of antiviral medication that can ease but not cure the disease, I ran to my car and sobbed so hard, a security guard knocked on the window and asked me if I was okay.

**Confronting her guy.** Once I regained my composure, I went to see my boyfriend. He begrudgingly copped to messing around with another woman. I asked, "Did you know at the time that the person you cheated on me with had herpes?" He replied, "Yes." That was all I needed to hear to split with him for good on the spot.

**Feeling hopeless and afraid.** For the next two days, I lay in bed, unable to function because I felt so isolated and betrayed. I wasn't in love with my ex, but I liked him a lot. He tried calling a few times, saying we should talk things over, but I didn't bother returning his phone calls.

**Her biggest fear.** The initial outbreak lasted six weeks. There was a lot of discomfort—it hurt when I wiped myself after peeing, and the sores itched like crazy as they crusted over and healed. But I didn't focus on the physical discomfort of herpes so much as I panicked about spreading the infection accidentally. At my job as a pastry chef, I was afraid of giving it to someone by using the toilet, and at home, I was terrified of passing it to my mom or dad via the shower.

**Getting the facts.** Luckily, I have an aunt who is an infectious-disease doctor, and I opened up to her about my diagnosis. She reassured me that it was highly unlikely I could transmit herpes by sharing a bar of soap in the shower, by using a toilet, or through any other kind of casual contact. She also told me that 1 in 4 women are infected, which I didn't know.

**Dealing with outbreaks.** The next several months were very hard. I told friends and my parents, and they were all supportive. But I soon had another outbreak, and then a third that was two months long. My doctor prescribed a different antiviral medication that's taken daily to help keep the virus dormant. Because of this, I've since had far fewer and less severe outbreaks. Not having them so often helped me to straighten up and start living again...and that included dating.

**Telling a new man.** I was always -up-front about my disease on the first date. I'd say, "I want to be honest with you, I have genital herpes. It's just a tiny part of who I am, and I don't let it affect me." Surprisingly, most guys were very understanding. I had a few short relationships, and then I had a boyfriend for eight months who was herpes-negative. He'd dated a girl with herpes before, so he knew all about it and how to be careful.

**Living with an STD.** It's been almost a year and a half since my diagnosis. I get an outbreak every four months, and it only lasts a week or so. Herpes has barely affected my life, except in one

major, positive way: I decided to go back to school as a nursing major so I can help other women become more proactive about their health. I know I wouldn't have made that career switch if it hadn't been for my own experience.

## **Arianna Daut, 24**

**In the dark about STDs.** I was 21 and a virgin when I moved from my home state of Utah to Arizona to launch a career as an illustrator. In the conservative religious community where I grew up, sex was never discussed. As for STDs, I'd heard of herpes, yet I didn't even know what HPV was. But then I fell for a guy, and soon I moved into his apartment and began my first sexual relationship.

**Painful symptoms strike.** Two months later, I developed mysterious genital sores. They were red, dime-size blisters, with clear fluid draining from them. It hurt to touch them and even to walk or pee. I also noticed painless skin tag-like white bumps on my vulva and vagina. Of course, I was really scared, but I was also hoping that maybe I just had an allergy to a new laundry detergent.

**Two shocking diagnoses.** No surprise, I was wrong about the allergy to laundry detergent. I tested positive for herpes and HPV. The blisters were herpes lesions, and the skin tags were warts, a common symptom of some strains of HPV. The doctor I went to wasn't especially sympathetic or helpful. I felt ashamed and embarrassed, but mostly I was stunned. I never dreamed I'd get not one but two STDs, especially one I'd barely heard of.

**How her guy reacted.** When I gave him the news, my boyfriend felt horribly guilty—he said he had no idea he had any STDs. I believed him then and still believe him now. Although he tested positive for herpes and HPV shortly after I did, he never had a single symptom of either disease.

**Why me?** In the days that followed, my self-esteem plunged. Because of my upbringing, I couldn't help thinking the STDs were punishment for having sex before marriage. Then I started doing research on the Internet, and I found some comfort in the fact that STDs are extremely common. That eased my guilt slightly.

**Getting treatment.** While I was dealing with the emotional effects, I had to take care of the physical symptoms. The herpes sores went away within two weeks, after which my doctor prescribed a lotion for the warts. But the lotion didn't work, so I had to undergo treatments with an acid-based topical solution.

I also had laser surgery to remove the warts from inside my vagina and, as it turns out, my cervix. Both treatments were painful, but thankfully, the warts soon disappeared. A few weeks later, my boyfriend and I could have sex again. I didn't have a recurrence of herpes or warts, so although I still felt dirty, life returned to normal.

**A killer consequence.** Since some types of HPV can cause cervical cancer, I had to see my gyno for frequent Pap tests. One came back suspicious. More tests confirmed my worst fear: I had cancer cells on my cervix. Turns out, I had contracted one HPV type that triggers

warts and two others linked to cancer. I was terrified. I honestly thought I was going to die, even though the cancer was in an early stage.

**Her mother's harsh words.** I didn't share with my family that I'd gotten STDs, but I couldn't keep the cancer diagnosis from them. So I told my mom. She looked at me with a blank face, then coldly asked, "How did you get it?" When I told her how, she said she wanted to kill my boyfriend. Then she remarked that cancer was actually the result of my choices.

In a sense this is true, but to triumph over the disease, I needed to keep my distance from that kind of thinking. I told my brother and sister too, who'd also moved away from our conservative church, and they understood where I was coming from. That helped.

**Battling cancer...and relationship stress.** While I was being treated for cancer with another round of laser surgery, my boyfriend was really wiggled out. We were fighting more too. I blamed him for the situation I was in, and I felt he didn't understand what I was going through.

He started seeing a therapist because it was so hard for him to accept that he was the cause of my cancer. I started seeing a counselor too, to work out my anger at him and all that had happened. It was a tense time.

**Moving on.** Luckily, the laser surgery removed all the cancer from my -cervix, and I didn't need any more treatments, though I always have to be checked because it can come back at any time. My boyfriend and I were getting along again. Two years later, we had a baby boy together. We also got married, but it didn't last—just three months.

**Dating with STDs.** I'd like to start meeting men again, but I'm really not sure how I'll tell guys I have herpes and HPV. But I will definitely inform them early on. My thinking is, if they're appalled by my diagnosis, then I don't need them.

**No longer feeling guilty.** I'm still -cancer-free, and I haven't had an -outbreak of herpes or warts since the very first one. It sounds crazy, but the main thing I regret is wasting all that time feeling ashamed and dirty. What happened to me was unlucky, yes, but I'm no longer plagued by the idea that I brought it upon myself. •

#### Surprising STD Fact

- About 45 percent of women ages 20 to 24 have HPV, the most common viral STD, at any given time (most will suffer no health consequences, as their -immune systems will fight off the virus before it does any harm). And 25 percent of women will end up with genital herpes.
- Females are at greater risk. Unlike the penis, the vagina is lined with warm, moist mucus membranes that are easy for bacteria and viruses to pass through, explains Lillian Schapiro, ob-gyn in Atlanta. This environment is very hospitable to bacterial and viral growth...which is why women are more likely to contract STDs than men are.
- Ninety-three percent of people surveyed believe their partner doesn't have one. But only a third have discussed STDs with their partners,

reports a survey from the American Social Health Association.

- About 40 percent of women with untreated chlamydia—the top bacterial STD—or gonorrhea will develop pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), an infection of the upper reproductive tract that can reduce fertility by scarring the fallopian tubes. And 1 in 8 females with PID will become infertile.

- Half of all sexually active women ages 25 and under have not been screened for chlamydia. Yet women in this age-group should be tested annually. Seventy-five percent of infected women show either no or vague symptoms, so it's often not caught and treated at an early stage.

- Twenty percent of people with genital herpes never have a second outbreak. Most sufferers have four to five outbreaks (lasting 3 to 14 days) per year...and even more during the first year they contract the disease, says Paul Lyons, MD, associate professor of family and community medicine at Temple University in Philadelphia.

- Herpes hits other body parts as well. Besides your genitals and mouth, you can develop herpes sores on your butt and upper thighs. "Condoms only cover part of the genitals, and though it's not common, you can develop lesions anywhere you made contact with the skin of an infected guy," says Lydia A. Shrier, MD, attending physician in adolescent/young-adult medicine at Children's Hospital Boston.

- The HPV vaccine won't totally protect you. It's recommended that all females between 9 and 26 be vaccinated (many gyns think women over 27 should be too). But it only keeps you from contracting four viral types, two of which cause 70 percent of cervical cancer cases, says Livette Johnson, MD, infectious-disease specialist at Saint Vincent's Hospital Manhat-tan. For added defense, use condoms and get a yearly Pap test, which can detect cancerous or precancerous changes.

- HPV causes more than cervical cancer. A new study suggests that HPV may lead to throat cancer...and that the route of transmission is via oral sex with a partner who has HPV, says Freda McKissic Bush, ob-gyn in Jackson, Mississippi. Other studies link HPV to penile and vulval cancer.