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Deadline Reporting Story

Michelle Balliet and Kathy Hynes, disease specialists from the Montgomery County Department of Health, informed Ursinus students about the causes and symptoms of sexually transmitted diseases on Tuesday, March 5, at 7 p.m. in Wismer Lower Lounge.

Balliet also discussed ways of lowering risk for STDs. Hynes related where free testing is available. Both women answered students' questions throughout the informal presentation.

Balliet said STDs are either caused by a bacteria, virus or protozoa. She said STDs that are caused by bacteria can be cured. This includes chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis. STDs caused by viruses, such as herpes and genital warts, are incurable. According to Balliet, a virus stays in the body for life, and symptoms can reappear at any time.

Balliet said STDs are contracted by oral, anal and vaginal sex. She also said babies of infected mothers can contract an STD at birth.

"Although most STDs infect the genitals, we have seen women who are prostitutes who have sores on their armpits ... this occurred when the man she was with wanted to be pleased by rubbing his penis under her armpit," Balliet said.

"Not only can you have one sexually transmitted disease, but you can have many at the same time," Balliet said. Graphic slides appeared on screen to illustrate her point.

"This man has genital warts and chlamydia," she said, pointing to one slide.

Balliet said the symptoms of chlamydia are watery discharge or bleeding from the genitals, abdominal pain or pain during urination and sex. She said it takes 7-14 days before symptoms begin to appear.

Balliet said the symptoms of gonorrhea are identical to chlamydia, except gonorrhea has an incubation period of 2-7 days.

"Doctors usually treat chlamydia or gonorrhea with an orally- taken pill that will cure both diseases," Balliet said. However, Balliet said the gonorrhea bacteria is becoming resistant to

treatment.

Balliet said syphilis can be cured as well, but only if it is treated in its early stages. Balliet said painless sores which last about three weeks appear in the first stage. She said some women never know they have sores because they occur inside of the vagina.

The second stage of syphilis is called the latent stage because all symptoms vanish for about two weeks, Balliet said.

"Many people think that, because the sores are gone they are okay, but they get worried when they enter the third stage ... a full body rash," Balliet said.

She said many people experience hair loss in the third stage, and some have lost their eyelids. Balliet said the syphilis bacteria will go on to attack the brain and heart if left untreated. She said all stages of syphilis are treated with shots of penicillin.

"Which STDs do they test you for when you apply for a marriage license?" a red-haired young woman in the audience said.

The newly-married Balliet fielded her query. She said only syphilis screening is performed in Pennsylvania. The petite bespectacled Hynes said some states only require a couple to sign a paper saying they have read a pamphlet on STDs.

Hynes spoke about the viral STDs. She stressed that the HIV virus is transmitted only through blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. Hynes said the virus is also present in saliva, vomit and urine in low concentrations.

"The HIV virus is not a risk when it is at such low concentrations ... you would have to drink one quart of infected saliva to be at risk," Hynes said.

Hynes said a person with the HIV virus can be asymptomatic for 5-15 years.

Hynes repeated several times that some viruses are spread through direct contact. Genital warts, for instance, are contracted this way.

Hynes said genital warts are highly contagious, yet painless. She said the size of these warts varies, but some people need laser surgery to reduce their warts. Hynes said a topical medication is available to reduce warts, but outbreaks can occur throughout life.

Hynes said genital warts increase a person's risk of developing cervical, penis or anal cancer.

Herpes, too, is transmitted through direct contact. Hynes said the main symptom is an outbreak of extremely painful sores. Hynes said these sores can occur several times a year, and outbreaks usually occur when a person is not getting enough rest. Hynes said it is important to keep these sores dry to avoid infection. She said some people use a hairdryer for this purpose.

"Grandmothers can give their grandchildren herpes," Hynes said. She was referring to "Herpes One" (herpes above the waist). Hynes said "Herpes One" is common and is usually spread through kissing. Hynes said "Herpes Two" (herpes below the waist) is usually spread through sexual contact.

Balliet said ways of lowering risk for all STDs are honesty with sexual partners, monogamy and regular screening at a clinic. Hynes said the use of condoms and dental dams significantly lowers risk, too.

Hynes said free testing is available at the Montgomery County Department of Health, which is located at 55 East Marshall St. in Norristown.

"Testing is anonymous ... You could come in and tell us you were Mickey Mouse, and we'd test you -- no questions asked," Hynes said.