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Health Officer says STD Awareness Month is a call to action

April is STD Awareness Month, an annual observance to raise awareness about the impact of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the importance of discussing sexual health with healthcare providers and partners.

The West Virginia Department of Health and Human Resources State Health Officer and Commissioner for Public Health, Dr. Marian Swinker says, "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that there are approximately 19 million new cases of STDs in the United States every year. STDs are increasing in young people 15-24 years of age. While 15-24 year-olds make up 25 percent of the sexually active population in the country, they accounted for 70 percent of the new chlamydia and gonorrhea infections in 2010. This trend is of concern because STDs are affecting a higher proportion of young people."

CDC Data from 2010 indicated that there were 1.6 million total cases of chlamydia and gonorrhea making them the two most commonly reported infectious diseases in the U.S. African Americans account for 38 percent of all reported chlamydia and gonorrhea cases nationally even though they account for just 14 percent of the U.S. population. Swinker says the Division of STD, HIV and Hepatitis (DSHH) 2010 data indicates there were 3,916 chlamydia infections in WV. Of those cases reported, 35 percent were found to be in 15-19 year-olds, while 42 percent occurred in those 20-24 years of age.

Another focal area, according to Dr. Swinker, is gonorrhea, the second most frequently reported infectious disease. The 2010 data for the state indicates 37 of WV's 55 counties reported at least one case of gonorrhea. Of the gonorrhea infections reported, 27 percent of the cases occurred in young people 15-19 years of age and 38 percent in those 20-24 years of age.

Dr. Swinker says, "These infections are treatable if recognized, but can cause significant health effects if untreated." She says, "STD Awareness Month is a reminder to us all that we need to be talking about STD prevention. Together, parents and health care providers can help young people make healthy choices and learn about the risks associated with sexual behaviors." STD educational information and STD testing information are available online at www.std.wv.gov or by calling 1-800-642-8244.