

Canyon County has more new chlamydia cases than neighboring counties

Study: Canyon County has 485 new cases of the STD per 100,000 people

Canyon County has more new cases of chlamydia each year than any of its neighboring counties — a lot more, according to an annual health report released this spring.

The Annual County Health Rankings accumulation of 2014 health data show that Canyon County saw 485.7 new cases of chlamydia per 100,000 people. It's part of an upward trend in infections in recent years. Among neighbors, Ada County was the next highest at 367 cases per 100,000. While the data may be surprising to some, public health professionals have known about the uptick in sexually transmitted diseases for some time.

“No, we weren't surprised,” said Laurie Boston, former spokeswoman for Southwest District Health. “The chlamydia situation has been at the forefront for several years at District Health.”

There is no single solution to the rise of sexually transmitted diseases, Boston said. Improved access to treatment and promoting better sexual health habits are priorities, but health officials are also pushing that a more robust and informed discussion about sex will slow the spread of disease.

Infection rates for chlamydia are up across the nation. Idaho has fared better than other states.

The Gem State is 45th for chlamydia rates at 344 new cases per 100,000 statewide, according to the Centers for Disease Control's most recent data — Alaska is worst in the nation at 768.3 cases per 100,000. Despite being on the low end, nationally, Idaho has seen chlamydia rates nearly quadruple since 1996, according to the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare.

On the rise

Chlamydia is one of the most common sexually transmitted diseases but it's also one of the most treatable. A challenge for health officials is that most people with chlamydia show no symptoms. Those that do show symptoms can experience burning and swelling of the genitals. Symptoms or not, the disease is easily transmitted during sex and can also be passed from pregnant women to children during childbirth. The disease is treatable, but only if patients know they have it, which can be a problem.

The surge in cases can be attributed to many factors ranging from the mundane — increased and improved testing is spotting cases that would have otherwise gone unrecorded — to the millennial — the rise of dating apps such as Tinder.

But as for why Canyon County is seeing more cases than its neighbors, Boston said it's important to account for community differences. Comparing counties can be an "apples to oranges" evaluation, but generally Boston said poorer communities are more likely to see higher rates of teen pregnancy and STDs, as do agricultural communities.

Just as the problem has multiple sources, Boston said the solution will also draw on several efforts. Ana Vidales is part of that effort.

"If parents aren't providing this information to their students, Ana is, so this education is incredibly valuable," Boston said.

'Something we don't talk about'

Vidales teaches a voluntary course focused on educating teenagers about healthy lifestyles, including sex education. But last year only two of the 13 secondary schools in Canyon County hosted the course, Boston said. Schools may also teach their own curriculum, and many make use of the No Regrets nonprofit program, a short, abstinence-based program with programs for grades 7-12.

Idaho state statute says sex education "rests upon the home and the church" and that schools "can only complement and supplement those standards which are established in the family." Still, Vidales said she knows first-hand sex education is a tough conversation in regions like Canyon County.

"I come from a very conservative background," Vidales said. "My parents are both Hispanic, so it's something that we don't talk about."

To address the rise in sexually transmitted diseases, Vidales is working to educate teenagers and dispel some of the common misnomers about how infections occur. The class is abstinence-based, but Vidales doesn't shy away from talking about contraception. If nothing else, she said, she wants students to learn that they have choices and those choices have consequences.

"I know (parents are) nervous about me having a conversation about oral sex (spreading diseases), for example, but I have to say that these are the facts," she said.

And just as parental concerns remind her of her own upbringing, she also sees some of herself in her students and tries to "be the person you wish you had when you were in their shoes."

"I wish I would have had this information growing up," Vidales said, noting she had friends who became pregnant as teenagers. "I wish I had had that resource or somebody to empower me to think it's OK to say 'no.'"

Encouraging dialogue

Southwest District Health's sex education program is expanding. Boston said this year the program will be taught in three schools in the county in addition to juvenile detention centers in Nampa and Caldwell. The majority of cases occur in people aged 18-24, according to the CDC, but Boston's hope is that older adults and parents can also be informed as to the public health implications of rising STD rates and how classes like those taught by Vidales are a part of the solution. Borrowing language from Vidales, Boston said it's important for adults to learn "everything has a consequence."

"That's an ongoing education to let people know of the importance of the education and the consequences."

To do this, District Health runs a program called Bridging the Gap specifically designed to encourage parents to talk with their children about sex. Vidales said the stigmas between parents and children discussing sex can be greater in Hispanic households.

In fact, chlamydia rates among Hispanics are double what they are in white populations nationally, according to the Centers for Disease Control, and nearly one in four Canyon County residents are Hispanic, based on most recent Census data. Boston said the "birds and bees" conversation also needs to grow to include modern issues, like online dating apps.

One of the first steps Canyon County residents can take is to get screened for chlamydia or other sexually transmitted diseases. The district health office is at 13307 Miami Lane in Caldwell. Appointments for testing can be made by calling 208-455-5345. Testing resources are also available at the Payette, Emmett and Weiser offices.

STD Numbers

New chlamydia cases each year (cases per 100,000 people)

- Canyon County: 485.7
- Ada County: 367.1
- Owyhee County: 313.8
- Gem County: 245.7
- Payette County: 225.6
- Statewide: 337.6

Source: County Health Rankings

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Total number of reported STD cases statewide over time:

- Chlamydia:
1996: 1,487
2006: 3,345
2015: 5,630
- Gonorrhea:
1996: 96
2006: 206
2015: 472
- HIV:
1996: 45
2006: 40
2015: 43

Source: Idaho Department of Health and Welfare

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