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A healthier America begins with reproductive and sexual health

SOMETIMES THE SMALLEST CHANGE CAN MAKE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE. If we take small actions, our communities, homes and families will see the large benefits of preventive care and grow the movement. Yet each year, despite the many easy ways to stay healthy, nearly 1 million Americans die from diseases that could have been prevented.

Routine screenings and education can go a long way toward helping Americans improve reproductive and sexual health. These measures will lower the risk of disease and deaths that could have been prevented.

Did You Know?

- Nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended. Risks associated with unintended pregnancy include low birth weight, postpartum depression and family stress.⁵⁰
- The preterm birth rate has risen by more than 20 percent during the past 20 years. Preterm infants are more likely to suffer complications at birth, such as respiratory distress, die within the first year of life, and have lifelong health challenges, such as cerebral palsy and learning disabilities.⁵¹
- There are approximately 19 million new cases of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the United States each year — almost half occur in young people ages 15 to 24.⁵²
- More than 1 million people in the United States are estimated to be living with HIV infection, and more than 50,000 people become infected each year.⁵³
- Binge drinking and illicit drug use are associated with intimate partner violence and risky sexual behaviors, including unprotected sex and multiple sex partners.⁵⁴
- Infant mortality rates are higher among women of color, adolescents, unmarried mothers, people who smoke, those with lower educational attainment and those who did not obtain adequate prenatal care.⁵⁵
- Preconception and prenatal care can reduce birth defects, lower birth weight and reduce the likelihood of other preventable problems.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Finer LB, Henshaw SK. Disparities in rates of unintended pregnancy in the United States, 1994 and 2001. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 2006; 38(2):90–6.

⁵¹ Behrman RE, Butler AS, Editors. *Preterm birth: causes, consequences, and prevention*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press; 2007. Institute of Medicine. *Preterm Birth: Causes, Consequences, and Prevention*. Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press; 2007.

⁵² Weinstock H, Berman S, Cates Jr. W. Sexually transmitted diseases among American youth: incidence and prevalence estimates, 2000. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 2004; 36(1):6–10.

⁵³ Hall HI, Song R, Rhodes P et al. Estimation of HIV incidence in the United States. *JAMA* 2008; 300(5):520–9.

⁵⁴ Wechsler H, Lee JE, Kuo M, Lee H. College binge drinking in the 1990s: A continuing problem: Results of the Harvard School of Public Health 1999 College Alcohol Study. *Journal of American College Health* 2000; 48:199–210.

⁵⁵ Frieden TR, Jaffe HW, Stephens JW, Thacker SB, Zaza S. CDC Health Disparities and Inequalities Report – United States, 2011. *MMWR* 2011; 60(Suppl): 49–51.

⁵⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Preconception health and care, 2006*. Available at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/preconception/documents/At-a-glance-4-11-06.pdf>. Accessed on May 18, 2011.

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Together we can address these statistics and live longer and healthier lives. You can protect yourself, your family and community in many ways, no matter where you are. Taking action, both big and small, to promote reproductive and sexual health is more than just common sense — it's effective. Below are just a few examples of how you can live healthier:

Start small...

- ✓ Promote the importance of planning for healthy pregnancies in your community. Planning is especially important in preventing teen pregnancy and childbearing. It can also help improve women's educational attainment, employment opportunities and financial stability.⁵⁷
- ✓ Eat healthy, stay active, stop using tobacco and monitor alcohol use and see a doctor regularly during pregnancy.
- ✓ Have routine preventive screenings to enhance early detection of HIV, syphilis, chlamydia and other STIs.
- ✓ Support comprehensive reproductive and sexual health services for men and women, as well as sexual health education.
- ✓ Discuss sexual health concerns with your health care provider.
- ✓ Communicate with children regarding their knowledge, values and attitudes related to sexual activity, sexuality and healthy relationships.
- ✓ Support the GYT: Get Yourself Tested campaign, which seeks to reduce the spread of STIs among young people through information, communication, testing and treatment as necessary.

Think big...

- ✓ Advocate for access to quality health services and support for safe practices to improve physical and emotional well-being to reduce teen and unintended pregnancies, HIV/AIDS, viral hepatitis and other STIs.⁵⁸
- ✓ Work with local schools to ensure they are providing comprehensive reproductive and sexual health education and services.
- ✓ Create a local movement: Collaborate with a local hospital to promote and offer HIV and other STI testing.
- ✓ Promote community-based prevention programs that address intimate partner violence and sexual violence.
- ✓ Encourage employers to provide health coverage and employee assistance programs that include family planning and reproductive health services.

There is much more you can do to encourage reproductive and sexual health beyond these actions. By raising awareness of ways to prevent reproductive and sexual health problems in your community during National Public Health Week and beyond, you can help your community become a healthier one.

⁵⁷ Moore KA, Morrison DR, Greene AD. Effects on the children born to adolescent mothers. In R. Maynard (Ed.), *Kids having kids*. Washington, D.C.:The Urban Institute Press; 1997:145–80.

⁵⁸ Kirby D. *Emerging answers 2007: Research findings on programs to reduce teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases*. The national campaign to prevent teen and unplanned pregnancy: Washington, DC. 2007.