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In STD Awareness Month, know that you have company

Let the Herpes poster girl assure you: it's more common than you think.

Posted: Thursday, Apr. 02, 2009

From Pam Wisniewski, a Ph.D. candidate at UNC Charlotte:

What the H!?

That's how I felt when I was diagnosed with genital Herpes and high risk HPV. No one told me that using a condom doesn't protect you 100 percent from these viruses. No one told me that "complete" STD tests rarely test for Herpes or HPV. April is STD Awareness month, and I have become Charlotte's poster girl for Herpes and HPV. An honor no one really wants but someone has to take.

So how did I become the Herpes poster girl? When I moved to Charlotte in 2005, I started a Yahoo Group for individuals with Herpes (Types I and II) and HPV in Charlotte to find friends and support. At first, my goal was selfish – to cope with my diagnoses by being able to "hide in the bushes" while still meeting people. Then, something happened. Charlotte H grew from being a simple message board to an active community. Now, we have more than 1,000 members and reach out to people through numerous social and support events. I see too many of my friends hurt by the stigma attached to our condition. These are good – no great – people! Teachers, nurses, plumbers, financial analysts, IT specialists, blue-collar workers, Sunday school teachers, students – respectable people who make a contribution to our society and because of Herpes or HPV are reduced to a punch-line of an off-color joke. And now, for that, I say what the H!? I have to do something.

So here's my typical spiel: One in four women have genital Herpes while one in five men have it. Over 80 percent of adults have oral Herpes (aka cold sores) which can infect a partner genitally through oral sex. One in two adults have been infected by HPV. One in four teen-aged girls has had at least one STD. And here's the kicker – about 90 percent of people who have Herpes or HPV don't know they have it. Both HSV and HPV are transmitted through skin-to-skin contact through oral sex, sex (even with a condom), while the infected person is on suppression medication, or even when they have no symptoms at all.

My point: if you have ever had sex, you could be me. I am no one special. I am 29 years old, a Republican, a non-denominational Christian who has a graduate education, a home, a loving husband, two cats, a dog and who loves eating pepperoni pizza. And I have to live every day of the rest of my life with two incurable STDs.

The social stigma surrounding Herpes and HPV is painfully obvious while many times the actual symptoms are not. It is a Catch-22 because people who have H (our pet name for it) are too scared to come forward to help dispel the myth while staying in hiding just reconfirms that we should feel dirty, ashamed and alone. So for STD awareness month, I want to make this a special tribute to all of those who feel like they have to hang their heads in shame because our society dictates it. We all make mistakes. We all deserve forgiveness, respect, and love. You are not dirty, should not be ashamed, and you definitely aren't the only one.

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