

sex talk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

wildfact

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Q Do animals carry STDs?

A. While this column usually addresses sexual health and relationship issues among *Homo sapiens*, the answer to your question underscores the link between humans and other animals in the origin and spread of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Yes, STDs are found throughout the animal kingdom, and are common among both domestic and wild animals, infecting everything from cattle to koalas, to dogs, birds and even some invertebrates.

Because of their economic and social significance, STDs in farm animals tend to be understood best. Among these, one of the most prevalent is brucellosis, also known as undulant fever, which can infect domestic livestock, including cattle, sheep, pigs, goats and other mammals. In addition to its toll on infected animals, brucellosis is a concern since it has the ability to be passed to humans through the consumption of unpasteurized milk or soft cheeses made from milk of infected livestock, although this is rare due to modern disease control practices. There is also evidence that gonorrhea came to humans from cattle, and syphilis may have been transmitted to people from cows or sheep, possibly through sex.

Wild animals are known to contract STDs as well, and much of what we know about them is from

veterinarians and researchers who work with captive animals in zoos. In particular, scientists have looked to these animals to learn more about human STDs and how they might be prevented. For example, herpes in captive baboons has shed light on the transmission of genital herpes in humans and recent progress on a Chlamydia vaccine for koalas may offer similar breakthroughs for people down the road.

By definition, we tend to think of STDs as being transmitted through sexual or intimate contact, but many disease-causing agents can be spread in other ways. The transmission of the HIV virus, for example, is thought to have occurred when African hunters came into contact with infected blood from chimpanzees. Following that jump, HIV was then able to spread among humans through both sexual and non-sexual (e.g. contaminated needles used by IV drug users) contact.

Whether talking about animals or people, the means by which STDs are controlled remains the same: stopping transmission, screening, diagnosing, and treating infections. For more information on a wide range of sexual health issues, including STDs, check out www.health.arizona.edu.



Have a question? Send it to sextalk@email.arizona.edu

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