

sextalk.

answers to your questions about sex and relationships

factoid STDs are widely distributed throughout the animal kingdom. There are even plant STDs that are carried by pollinating insects.

Q. Where do STDs come from?

A. Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), as their name suggests, are really just infectious diseases that happen to spread through sexual contact. Where an infectious disease like the flu virus is transmitted through airborne droplets, STDs move from one person to another through skin-to-skin contact or the exchange of bodily fluids in the oral, anal and genital regions during sex.

The mention of STDs goes back to the dawn of recorded history: hepatitis was probably identified as far back as Hippocrates in the 4th century BC; gonorrhea was described by the Egyptians during the reign of the pharaohs; and Moses set forth laws that were intended to curb the spread of venereal disease among the ancient Hebrews.

But what of their deeper origins? Each STD, be it a virus, bacteria or protozoan, has taken a different evolutionary path to its present day existence. Many were likely present in other animals first, later mutating to survive in humans. Once the trans-species leap was made, the proliferation of each disease became tied to a complex array of factors including the movement of people – facilitated by ships, roads, airplanes, urbanization and globalization – and the sexual practices they brought with them, to name only a few.

For a glimpse into the development of a new STD with worldwide implications, we need only look back as far as 1981, when the Centers for Disease Control first reported what would later be known as the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV. Today, there are approximately 40 million people infected with HIV worldwide, a staggering number considering the first human case probably occurred as recently as 1930, when a hunter in the Belgian Congo may have come into contact with blood infected with the Simian Immunodeficiency Virus, the chimpanzee forebearer of HIV.

In the future, old STDs will keep evolving and new ones will continue to emerge, underscoring the importance of their diagnosis, treatment, prevention and control.

For more information on STDs and other sexual health topics, check out the SexTalk archives at www.health.arizona.edu.

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

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