



Teen Health

Hidden Epidemic...

Gonorrhea and Syphilis are Back!

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Writer

Did you know that at least a half million of Canadian teens are sexually active? The good news, according to the survey conducted by the Canadian Association for Adolescent Health (CAAH) and Ipsos-Reid in 2006, is that the majority are practicing safe sex. This survey showed that 75% of teens that engaged in sexual intercourse had used some sort of protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), now more commonly referred to as **sexually transmitted infections (STIs)**, even though they showed no STI symptoms.

- FACT: Studies show that 75% of sexually active teens use protection against STIs

However, the same survey also revealed that there are still an alarming number of teens that engage in risky sexual behaviour.

What would *you* consider risky sexual behaviour? Would **oral sex** make the list? Almost 60% of teens who wanted to remain a virgin considered oral sex a good alternative to intercourse.

But, consider this...the most common ways you can get a STI are from **exchanging bodily fluids** and **skin-to-skin contact!** So, if you think that oral sex is a perfectly safe alternative to intercourse, you might want to think again! Here are the facts:

In Canada, between 1997 and 2004, the number of reported cases of **gonorrhea** increased by 82%, with the highest number of cases diagnosed in young women between ages 15 and 24, while for **syphilis** the increase was by a whopping 908%!

- FACT: STIs can be passed on by: i) exchange of bodily fluids, and ii) skin-to-skin contact

So what, you say? Well, let's think about why these two STDs are making such a striking comeback. The simple answer is that both gonorrhea and syphilis can be transmitted through oral sex. And, if this is news to you, you're not alone. Almost one in five teens were

unaware these diseases could be transmitted that way. No wonder experts refer to this increase in STD as a "hidden epidemic"!

- FACT: STIs such as gonorrhea and syphilis can be transmitted through oral sex

So, what are gonorrhea and syphilis anyway?

They are two of the most common STDs, which also include chlamydia, trichomonas, pubic lice and scabies, genital herpes, genital warts (HPV), hepatitis B and HIV/AIDS.

Gonorrhea, commonly known as "the clap" or "a dose", is an infection caused by the bacteria *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*. Bacteria are any of a large group of small, unicellular microorganisms normally found in the environment or on the body. Although not all bacteria are "evil", some of them do cause diseases in humans and other animals. Bacteria are generally classified based on their shape: rod-shaped (bacillus), spherical (coccus), comma-shaped (vibrio), or spiral (spirochete). *N. gonorrhoeae* is classified as coccus and is considered to be a **pathogen** since it can cause disease.

- FACT: Gonorrhea is caused by a pathogenic bacteria

Gonorrhea survives well in the throat and may lead to throat infections. While most throat infections from gonorrhea do not cause any symptoms, some may lead to sore throat, fever and swelling of the lymph nodes. Gonorrhea can be treated with antibiotics, but if left untreated it can cause serious health problems. Infection during pregnancy can lead to serious health problems for the unborn baby.

- FACT: Symptoms of oral gonorrhea infection include: sore throat, fever and/or swelling of the lymph nodes

You can become infected with gonorrhea from oral sex. If you get gonorrhea, you may not even know it, as you might not notice any symptoms, and pass it on to others. You may feel the symptoms as much as three to five days after engaging in oral sex, if symptoms show up at all.

If you suspect that you have been infected with gonorrhea, a **swab of the area** can tell you whether you have the STI or not.

Syphilis, like gonorrhea, is also caused by bacteria. This pathogen goes by the name of *Treponema pallidum* and is classified as a spirochete. Because its first symptom is a painless blister or a sore in the mouth that disappears on its own, *syphilis of the mouth can be easily missed*. While sores may disappear, the infection can remain active for many years. Symptoms may appear as soon as a few days after the infection or as long as months. The good news is that syphilis can be treated with antibiotics. But if left untreated, it can progress from painless mouth ulcers to a rash, heart disease or memory loss, and possibly even death. Syphilis during pregnancy can lead to serious health problems for the unborn baby.

Because initial symptoms are painless, a person can have syphilis without even knowing it and can then pass it on to other partners during

oral sex.

- **FACT:** Symptoms of oral syphilis infection include: painless sore inside the mouth, flu-like symptoms, and/or rash on the palms of the hands, soles of the feet, or over the entire body.

If you suspect that you have been infected with syphilis, a simple **blood test** can tell you whether you have it or not.

And, if you have syphilis or gonorrhea, tell your partner(s). They have the right to know so that they can see their doctor and receive appropriate treatment. If your partner is untreated, the infection can be passed back to you.

So, next time you are having oral sex, remember...although it is not considered a high-risk sexual activity, *oral sex is still risky*, and you can become infected with an STI.

Want to know more about syphilis, gonorrhea or other STDs? Check out this site:

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/std-mts/index.html>

You can also download a 24-page booklet in PDF format What you need to know about STI - Sexually Transmitted Infections from the Public Health Agency of Canada website:

<http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/publicat/std-mts/index.html>

References

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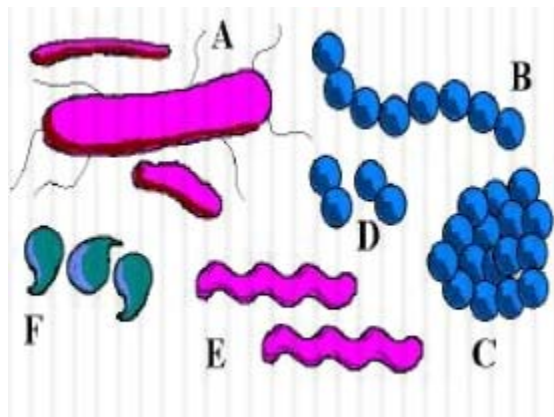
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Flora Krasnoshtein is a medical writer with a diverse background in scientific research, dentistry, academic writing, pharmaceutical advertising, continuing medical education (CME), and website-based consumer-oriented health information. Flora has a B.Sc. in Biology from York University and a M.Sc. in Molecular and Medical Genetics from the University of Toronto. Flora's research included experiments funded by the Canadian Space Agency, in collaboration with NASA, to study bone loss in space, and gene expression studies. In addition to being published in scientific peer-reviewed journals, Flora has written advertising and CME materials, including video scripts, for pharmaceutical (drug) companies for the public and professionals (doctors, pharmacists, dentists, nurses, etc.). In her spare time, Flora is a figure skating judge for Skate Canada, as well as a Flamenco and Classical Spanish Dancer with Ritmo Flamenco.

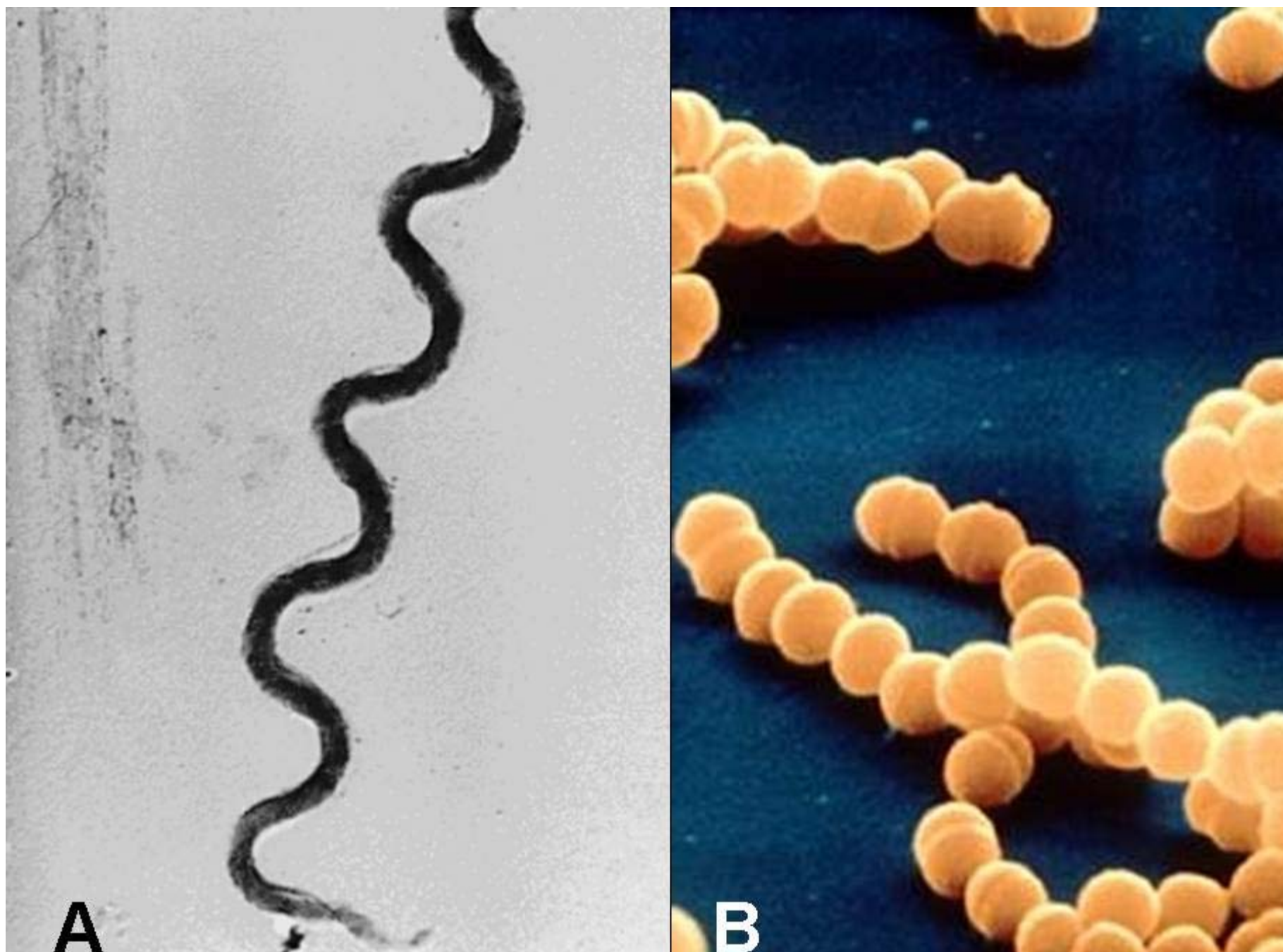


The good news is that more individuals are using protection against STIs during intercourse. However, STIs can also be transmitted by oral

sex, which has lead to a rise in gonorrhea and syphilis infections.



Bacteria are unicellular microorganisms that live in the environment. They are classified based on their shape: rod (bacillus), sphere (coccus), comma-shaped (vibrio), or spiral (spirochete). <http://thepedia.com/define/Bacteria>



*A. This twisted shape isn't a rotini, it is the bacteria *Treponema pallidum*, which causes syphilis. Because of its shape, this bacteria is classified as a spirochete. B. The bacteria *Neisseria gonorrhoeae*, which causes gonorrhea, is considered a coccus due to its spherical shape.*