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## STDs still a threat to many teens

By Susan Reimer

We must have thought we had this whole teen sex thing beat.

We parents were starting to believe that maybe our kids do listen to us, even if they don't obey us.

We were starting to understand that our kids want to hear from us what we believe, and we had ginned up enough nerve to talk to them candidly about sex.

And they were telling us they weren't stupid and they weren't deaf, that words like chlamydia and papillomavirus were practically on their spelling lists at school. That it wasn't just the terrifying notion of actually getting pregnant, it was the idea of getting a disease. Of being filthy. Of being gross.

Looks like we were wrong. Again.

The results of a national study released last week show that one in four young women, ages 14 to 19, are infected with at least one of the Big Four sexually transmitted diseases: HPV, chlamydia, genital herpes and a common parasite called trichomoniasis.

The numbers break down like this: Almost half of black teens and 20 percent of white girls are infected. Among the infected women, 15 percent had more than one of these diseases.

You want to talk about epidemics among our kids? Forget about obesity, and let's talk about what is more widespread and potentially more damaging.

These STDs can cause cancer or render a young woman sterile, and she is almost certain to be unaware that she is infected until very late in the game.

The president of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Cecile Richards, told *The New York Times* that this was the Bush administration's abstinence-only policy come home to roost. She called it a "\$1.5 billion failure."

Bill Albert, deputy director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unwanted Pregnancy, isn't sure all the blame can be laid at the feet of sex-education classes the kids probably sleep through anyway.

Like the rest of us, he doesn't know what is going on in the minds of our teens and what might motivate them to at least protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases if they won't listen to our pleas to abstain for just a little while longer, until college, maybe.

"They have gotten smarter about pregnancy, and that's good," said Albert. "We have seen teen pregnancy rates drop by a third in this country and that's an amazing success story.

"But they haven't gotten smarter about sex, and that's not good."

You know what I think is going on?

Parents are hustling their daughters off to the pediatrician and getting them on the pill at the first sign of a boyfriend and then dusting off their hands like their job is done.

It is a pretty painless way to handle our discomfort with their sexuality. The doctor or the nurse practitioner handles most of the embarrassing talk.

But parents aren't following through.

They aren't saying, "Look, honey. The pill will only protect you against pregnancy. That's a good thing. But just about any boy you have sex with is likely to be infected with an STD. The numbers are out there. And the only hope you have of avoiding infection is to abstain and protect your young body, not to mention your young heart.

"Or you can carry a condom."

The Food and Drug Administration reported that latex condoms are "highly effective" in preventing chlamydia,

trichomoniasis, HIV, gonorrhea and hepatitis B; less so against genital herpes and syphilis and HPV.

The notion of the boy carrying a condom around in his wallet is as dated as ducktails and chinos. It has to be the girl who carries the condom, and she has to insist - and we have to give her the language and the guts to do this insisting - that he wear it during sex.

We have to tell our daughters that they must never put their sexual health in the hands of someone else. That they are the only ones they can trust in a clinch.

And then we have to go out and buy her a box of condoms and put it under the bathroom sink, with her blow dryer and her curling iron and her extra makeup.

Going out and buying them herself might be more than she can manage. Doing so would mean she was expecting to have sex. That she is the kind of person who has sex. That she is the kind of person who has sex with a guy who might give her a disease.

She doesn't want to think of herself that way, if she is doing any thinking at all.

That's where parents come in.