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## Kaiser Study Says Doctors Not Addressing Sex Issues with Women

By Julie Sevens Lyons, Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service

[SAN JOSE, Calif.] – Doctors may be good at asking their patients to say “Ahhh!” but few are questioning women about their sexual history and other sensitive issues that greatly influence their overall health.

A new national survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation in Menlo Park found that just 31 percent of women have discussed their sexual practices with their doctor in the past three years, and even fewer – 28 percent – were cautioned about sexually transmitted diseases during that time.

A minority of women said they talked about their smoking habits, alcohol use or calcium consumption during doctor visits. Domestic violence and mental health issues were also rarely discussed.

“The big question is, what are women and their doctors talking about?” said Alina Salganicoff, lead author of the report.

That many doctors have largely avoided talking with women about STDs is particularly troubling to some health advocates, who worry that women aren’t being screened for common infections, putting their fertility and even their lives at risk.

More than half of all Americans will acquire an STD during their lifetime, according to the American Social Health Association – but many women never develop symptoms and don’t know they are infected. If left untreated, some conditions can lead to pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility.

Without counseling about how to protect themselves from STDs, some women also may be putting themselves at risk for the human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, which causes AIDS.

“We know we still have a ways to go to reach the level of quality women deserve when they go in to see their practitioner,” said Dr. Gail Bolan, chief of the California Department of Health Services’ Sexually Transmitted Disease Control Branch. Bolan’s team has found that while California doctors are more likely to discuss sensitive topics with female patients than they were eight years ago, open communication is still a problem.

Assessing a woman's risk for venereal infections and providing counseling on proper use of contraceptives is key to a woman's reproductive health, she said. Still, "this has not yet become a routine part of care."

There are many reasons for that, experts believe.

Just as some patients are hesitant to initiate a conversation about their sexual habits with a doctor, "a lot of doctors do not feel comfortable talking to their clients about sex," said Dr. Beth Jordan, medical director of the Washington-based Association of Reproductive Health Professionals.

Some physicians fear they will offend their patients by asking if they engage in practices that may put them at risk for an STD. Others may make judgments "based on appearance or age or class about whether they might be at risk or not," said Dr. Dorothy Furgerson, medical director of Planned Parenthood Mar Monte, which includes Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. "That's a really dangerous assumption."

Many doctors are simply pressed for time and tend to talk to patients only about the chronic condition or acute ailment for which they are seeking medical attention.

That's unfortunate, said Michelle Zirkle-Yoshida, a nurse practitioner from Santa Cruz who has seen her share of women infected with venereal diseases.

Zirkle-Yoshida, who is married, said she has been questioned by her own doctor about her sexual history in the last few years. But the questioning didn't go far enough, she believes.

She was not asked if she thought she was at risk for STDs, she said. Or if she had changed sexual partners in the last year. Or whether her husband had other sexual partners. Those omissions may lead many physicians to believe they don't need to test some at-risk patients for infections when they really should.

"They really should be screening everybody who walks through their door," Zirkle-Yoshida said.

The survey of 2,766 women found that many cannot afford to go to a doctor in the first place. Because of rising health care costs, two-thirds of uninsured women delayed care or went without it. About one-fifth of women with insurance also skipped medical attention.

More than half of the women queried said they consider their doctor to be the best source of health information. Many may not realize that their doctor may be failing them on the issue of their sexual health.

"You shouldn't take it for granted that all the things you need to talk to your doctor about are the things your doctor is going to raise," Salganicoff said.

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