Women and STDs

By Jaclyn M. Cheek

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, public health concerns for Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) focused on syphilis and gonorrhea. However, the incidence of lesser known STD’s began to rise. The advent of AIDS in the 1980’s raised the public’s awareness of STDs, although the consequences and costs involved were not generally known. There is a widespread belief that, with the exception of AIDS, STDs do not cause serious health problems. However, if left untreated, reproductive tract infections in women can cause pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), ectopic pregnancy, infertility, adverse pregnancy outcomes, and maternal and infant illness and death.

Pelvic Inflammatory Disease

Most cases of PID are caused by either Chlamydia or gonorrhea. PID is one of the major causes of infertility in women. One study found that the risk of infertility after PID ranged from 5.8 to 60 percent, depending on the severity of the infection, the number of episodes, and the woman’s age. It is estimated that 10-15 percent of women in the U.S., that are of reproductive age, have had at least one episode of PID, and that approximately one million women have an episode of symptomatic PID each year. Evidence suggests that large numbers of women may have “silent” upper reproductive tract infections. This is a major concern, because PID’s long-term consequences—chronic pelvic pain, ectopic pregnancy, infertility and recurrent episodes of infection—are most likely to occur in women who do not receive early and adequate treatment.

Ectopic Pregnancy
The immediate causes of ectopic pregnancy are unknown, but it is estimated that up to 50 percent of ectopic pregnancies may be the result of previous PID. Women who have had PID have a sevenfold to tenfold increased risk of ectopic pregnancy. Of women who have had one ectopic pregnancy, 10-20 percent will have another, and 20-40 percent will be unable to conceive again.

**Adverse Pregnancy Outcomes**

Reproductive tract infections may affect pregnancy outcome by inflammation of the fetal membranes, which has been associated with low birth weight, prolonged rupture of the membranes, intrapartum fever, and perinatal sepsis and death. Viral infections can also affect the outcome of pregnancy. For example, spontaneous abortion may occur if a pregnant woman becomes infected with herpes before 20 weeks of gestation.

**Neonatal Health Problems**

Reproductive tract infections can cause problems during pregnancy and delivery; they can also be transmitted to the developing fetus or to the infant at the time of birth. These infections can cause serious health problems, some of which can last into adulthood. Gonorrhea can affect the eyes and other mucus membranes, or result in systemic disease, such as meningitis and septic arthritis. About one-third of babies born to HIV infected women will show evidence of infection within a year after birth, and about 20 percent of these will die by the age of 18 months.

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