

SANTA-ROSA

# STD infections in Santa Rosa County are on the rise. Here's what you need to know

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Between 2007 and 2019, Santa Rosa County saw an increase of over 68% in the incidence of chlamydia.

And with the most recent certified data from the Florida Department of Health indicating as much as a 28% increase in gonorrhea just from 2019 to 2020, experts in the field are sounding alarms over the fact that Santa Rosa County, along with the rest of Florida, is staring at some poor trends in sexually transmitted infection rates.

But what caused these trends, how does the county compare to the rest of the state and what can be done to alleviate the problems?

To give a comparison, according to the 2022 County Health Rankings & Roadmaps program by the University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute, for the most recent data used in 2019, Santa Rosa County had a chlamydia infection rate of just under 299 people per 100,000, while, in Florida as a whole, that average rate was much higher at just under 516 people per 100,000.

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Still, experts say the upward trend the county has been facing over the last decade is not a positive sign, even if the rates are lower compared to the state's other counties.

"I feel that any increase — it's obviously a concern," said Patty Dwiggins, the area 1 STD program director at the Florida Department of Health. Dwiggins' coverage area covers the

Florida Panhandle. In addition to that jump in gonorrhea, the county also experienced a 12% increase in syphilis rates between 2019 to 2020.

Dwiggins said there is no one thing driving the spike in infection rates, but she, and others, pointed out factors that led to the increase.

"What we saw in the (1990s) was that we developed effective treatment for HIV with the three drug antiretroviral regimens. And then people at risk thought that the severity of disease from HIV had gone down because there was effective treatment for it. So, I think in the late '90s, early 2000s, we started seeing the increase in traditional STD rates, because people weren't adopting safe sex practices," said Wesley Farr, a physician and lecturer in public health at the University of West Florida.

Farr emphasized while the three major sexual infections — chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis — can be treated, they can create other medical externalities that should deter people from having a cavalier attitude about them.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, since syphilis rates reached historic lows in the early 2000s, the rate has increased nearly every year through 2020, including spiking nationwide by almost 7% from 2019 to 2020.

## **Another contributing factor**

Dwiggins pointed to another contributing factor that has become an issue in the modern age.

"Anonymous sex. Take that, for instance. The sheer amount of people who use dating apps or hookup apps just to have some type of encounter with someone for sexual purposes and may not even know that person. You're not able to even contact them. Once you discover that you do have an STD, you don't know who they are," Dwiggins said.

Demographically speaking, Dwiggins and Farr both noted several groups that are either at a higher risk of being exposed to these infections or are less likely to get tested. They cited younger people, those in about the 18 to 24 range, Black residents, those near the poverty line and men who have sex with men as particularly at-risk groups.

"There have been increases in STDs nationwide in the state of Florida. Historically, in the south, the higher rates of STDs are in minority populations and metropolitan areas. And so, it's not surprising that Santa Rosa County, which is more of a rural area, would have lower rates than the rest of the states and metropolitan areas," Farr said.

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**In 2019:** Escambia County is a hotbed for STDs. What DOH is doing to turn it around

The two mentioned processes like educational efforts and normalization of testing as two strong ways to correct the trend on STDs in Santa Rosa County.

"People need to be aware. The public and the professionals need to be aware that the trend in STDs in Florida is an increase ... and that we need to reinstitute programs with education on prevention of STDs (and) education that STDs can cause serious medical problems," Farr said, adding if educational programs are aimed at a specific demographic, they need to be community-specific to be effective.

"(STD testing) should just be a normal part of your healthcare. Not only when you're having symptoms, or only when you suspect that there might be an issues," Dwiggin said. "(It should be viewed) as more of just all-encompassing health care. Everybody who's sexually active should be tested."