

What's new in sex?

By *Nicholas Staropoli* — June 24, 2015



There is a perception out there that the technology and

social media booms of the last decade have been [detrimental to public health](#) [1]. In particular hookup apps are being blamed by many for having contributed to the increases in sexually transmitted diseases and infections (STD/STIs). This belief is not entirely unwarranted; earlier this year the state of Rhode Island released a [report](#) [2] that blamed social media hookup apps such as Tinder, Grindr and Happn for the dramatic jumps in reported STDs in the state.

In Rhode Island between 2013 and 2014, cases of syphilis grew by 79 percent, HIV by 33 percent, and gonorrhea by 30 percent. Furthermore, these increases did not affect all demographics equally, as young people, i.e. the people more likely to use these apps to find a partner for sex, were the most affected. Rhode Island isn't the only place where this is happening. It's a nationwide trend, for example syphilis is up 10 percent since 2012.

Although technology is making the quick hookup a lot easier, it's also making it safer. One great example is condoms that change color when they encounter an STD-causing contagion. The condoms will also tell you what STD you are encountering: a change to green indicates chlamydia, purple for HPV, yellow for herpes and blue for syphilis. There's even a punny sciency name to go along with it [S.T.EYE](#). [3]

These color-changing condoms let its wearer know quickly if they should close up shop or if it's safe to proceed. Unfortunately, it may be awhile before they're on the market, as they were invented by 4 high school students in the UK and their debut was at the school's science fair.

One of the major obstacles to STD testing is the embarrassment people experience when having to go to the store and buy an over-the-counter STD test or request one from their doctor. But now there's an [app](#) [4] for that from Planned Parenthood that lets you order these tests anonymously. The app is called Planned Parenthood Direct ϕ and sends a discreet package to the user's home. Then the user sends their sample to a planned parenthood lab where the lab will test for chlamydia and gonorrhea. The results are then delivered straight to the smart phone. It's a convenient and anonymous way for people to get tested.

Planned parenthood also has a [service](#) [5] that allows anyone to anonymously text sexual health questions and have them answered by a health professional. A service called [Ask Brook](#) [6] does something similar in the UK. These services allow information about sexual health to get to teens who are either too embarrassed to ask a parent or teacher and/or teens who live in areas where sex education is not offered.

Another obstacle public health officials face when dealing with the spread of STDs is alerting the partners of someone who has recently contracted an STD. Tech age solution: send an anonymous [email](#) [7]. A website, called So They Can Know, allows someone to anonymously alert their sexual partners that they should get tested. Currently, you can only report Chlamydia, Gonorrhea, or Trichomoniasis but it's a start and saves people the embarrassment of an awkward talk. And in the case you do want to have that talk, the website offers videos and scripts to teach people how to engage in that dialogue with their partner.

The theme that runs through most of these innovations is anonymity, which is made possible largely by the privacy smartphones can provide. Most people treat the information (i.e. apps, search history, texts) in their smartphone with the same level of security usually reserved for a bank vault (e.g. fingerprint locks). Since there still is a tremendous stigma surrounding STDs and sex in general, the anonymity of the internet and smartphone make them a great ally to public health.

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Links

[1] <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/blame-tinder-rhode-island-social-media-stds-sexually-transmitted-diseases/>

[2] <http://www.ri.gov/press/view/24889>

[3] <http://www.naij.com/469074-we-invented-condoms-to-detect-stds-teenagers.html>

[4] <http://acsh.org/2015/06/cancer-vaccine-safe-effective-and-under-utilized/>

[5] <http://www.plannedparenthoodchat.org/>

[6] <http://www.brook.org.uk/our-services/category/ask-brook>

[7] <https://www.sotheycanknow.org/inform>