WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT STI TESTING

While sexual encounters cannot be made risk-free by standard STI testing, being tested for STIs can be an important part of your sexual health and well-being. Testing is an opportunity to ask questions and receive some objective input about your current sexual health status. It is vital to be honest about any specific concerns you have and any recent possible exposures, so that appropriate tests can be ordered in a timely manner. There are many sexually transmitted infections. Some are so rare that they are not heard of in this country, others are common in specific areas of the country or among subsets of the population.

HERPES AND GENITAL WARTS
The most common STIs in college populations are the viral infections of herpes (HSV) and genital warts (HPV). These viruses are transmitted by skin-to-skin contact, which can happen without intercourse, or even while using a latex barrier if the infected skin is not covered. Exposure to either virus may cause an outbreak of a skin infection or a carrier state, where the exposed person can still spread the viruses to other people, without knowing they have the virus. Symptoms may never develop or may develop years after exposure. In the absence of symptoms, there is no routine testing for the presence of these viruses. The Pap smear in women is done to detect precancerous or cancerous changes on the cervix as a result of exposure to certain types of the genital wart virus (otherwise known as HPV or Human Papilloma Virus). The common genital wart, which may be visible on the external genitals, is most often caused by viral subtypes that rarely become precancerous. The viral subtypes that cause cervical changes in the woman are not seen or tested for in the male at this time. Diagnosis for herpes and genital warts is usually based on the appearance of the lesions, but confirmatory tests can be done.

CHLAMYDIA AND GONORRHEA
STIs that are caused by bacteria, such as chlamydia or gonorrhea can be treated and are easily tested for in a woman as part of a pelvic exam. In the male, a urethral swab or a urine test may be used to detect these infections. Both gonorrhea and chlamydia can have long-term consequences if untreated, such as chronic pelvic infection and possibly infertility. Routine testing, therefore, is recommended, especially in the case of chlamydia, which is usually asymptomatic in women.

HEPATITIS, HIV, AND SYPHILIS
Blood testing is available for HIV, Syphilis, and Hepatitis B and C. It may or may not be appropriate for you to be tested for these based on whether or not you have had high risk sexual or blood exposure. As with all infections, there is a window or incubation period where the infection may not yet show up, so timing is important in reducing the risk of false negatives. We encourage HIV testing to be done through the Peer Education Program, as more time is allotted to education and problem solving around risk reducing behavior. The HIV peer-educators also offer an oral HIV test that does not involve blood being drawn, and many people prefer this. HIV testing through your clinician is confidential. The HIV Peer Testing Program is free and anonymous. Other testing programs are available in the community as well. If you have ever injected drugs, or shared needles, or nasal inhalant drug paraphernalia, or have otherwise been exposed to another’s blood or body fluids that are likely to be infected, testing is advisable.

TEST RESULTS
No lab test is foolproof. There can be false negatives, and rarely false positives. An unexpected result may prompt you to get confirmatory testing. Some lab results are given over the phone, and some only in person. Your clinician will tell you whether to schedule another appointment for your results. Another important point to remember about getting an “all clear” on testing is that there are always newly emerging diseases that have not yet been identified. As in the cases of HIV and Hepatitis C, the diseases were not recognized until symptoms developed years after exposure, and the epidemic was already in full swing. On the reverse side of this paper is a summary of common STDs. Please review this information so your specific concerns may be best addressed. Handouts on specific infections are also available.