

# HPRB NEWS JOURNAL



## New Research Reveals the Real Reasons Students Skip or Embrace At-Home STD Testing

*A new study highlights both the promise and the problems of at-home STD and HIV testing, revealing that many students still face social and personal barriers to taking control of their sexual health.*

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Sexually transmitted diseases and infections have made a large impact on the lives of college students across the United States. In fact, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) stated that the highest numbers of sexual transmitted infections, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and HIV, are reported among college-aged students.<sup>1</sup> Recent studies have emphasized the importance of access to testing on college campuses, showing that many students are hesitant to get tested due to being embarrassed, having privacy concerns, or being unaware of testing resources on campus. A recent scoping review in the *Journal of Primary Care & Community Health* examined self-testing measures for STDs, STIs, and HIV among college students in the US. The study looked through over 8000 articles, but only found four that met research criteria.<sup>1</sup> This demonstrates how little research is available that is focused specifically on this population. The study investigates the factors that influence college students' sexual health decision-making and describes why these

students are often unaware of a potential infection.<sup>1</sup> The studies show that self-testing measures are urgently needed by colleges to focus on the well-being and health of their students on campus.<sup>1</sup> This study discussed barriers and why college students may or may not use self testing kits for STD's. It found that many students avoid self testing because of low risk perception, and social stigma around getting tested.

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Whereas others are more willing to use these self tests because they are private, easy and convenient. One of the studies in this review<sup>3</sup> focused on rural college students' preference for at home kits due to costs, and confidentiality.

Another study<sup>4</sup> focused on hetero sexual male students and how they were discouraged from testing and practicing safe sex due to social norms and stigma. And lastly, showed that self testing increased testing rates especially for men and students<sup>5</sup>. Overall, these studies collectively showed the same patterns of social stigma and low risk perception making students less likely to get tested whereas privacy and easy access that these self testing kits offered encouraged STD testing. These findings showed similarities to a second study from the University of Iowa that reviewed the prevalence of sexually transmitted infections among college students, where risk behaviors such as unprotected sex and multiple sexual partners were found to be driving factors.<sup>2</sup> The crude model of the U.S. self-testing study found that while students valued confidentiality and convenience, stigma and cost concerns were strongly associated with decreased



testing behaviors. In contrast, the Iowa study highlighted that despite awareness of risks, many students continued to engage in behaviors such as inconsistent condom use and limited vaccination uptake, which directly contributed to higher infection rates.<sup>2</sup> Together, both studies point to a cycle where risky sexual behaviors increase STI prevalence, while stigma and lack of accessible testing discourage students from seeking care. This comparison emphasizes that tackling college STI rates requires addressing not only the social stigma tied to testing, but also the behavioral patterns that drive infections in the first place. The study revealed a startling disparity: even though there are such high rates of STD's among college students, there has been almost no research focusing on self-testing in the population. From more than 8,300 studies screened,

only four were somewhat relevant; even then, none directly addressed the challenges faced by students for self-testing. The studies, although limited, did suggest that self-testing could help break down barriers like stigma, lack of privacy, and lack of access to campus health services. However, since the evidence is so limited, colleges don't have clear guidance on how to effectively use self-testing measures to reduce STD rates on campus. Without taking urgent action to combat these infections with self-testing measures, schools risk missing a major opportunity to increase testing rates, catch infections earlier, and protect the students' health on campus. Moving forward, addressing the barriers and enhancing the facilitators of STD/STI/HIV self-testing among college students will be essential in improving overall sexual health outcomes.

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While stigma, financial cost, and confidentiality concerns continue to discourage many students from testing, interventions can focus on expanding affordable and easily accessible self-testing kits, increasing education on test accuracy, and promoting privacy protections. Additionally, campus health services should emphasize the benefits of self-testing, including confidentiality, convenience, and reduced stress, while also providing resources for follow-up care and support when needed. By normalizing self-testing and integrating it into student health programs, colleges can encourage routine testing, reduce the spread of infections, and empower students to take control of their sexual health.



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