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By **Matt Rocheleau**

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Officials believe online dating services and apps that lead to casual romantic encounters are at least partially to blame for an increase in sexually transmitted diseases in Rhode Island, putting the state in the midst of an emerging debate over how the technology affects public health.

With rates of syphilis, gonorrhea, and chlamydia at a 10-year high in Rhode Island, public health workers there say they are alarmed by accounts from health care providers who say their infected patients “met their partners through online websites and geo-locating apps.”

Though the state health department does not have firm data on how many people contracted the diseases through such encounters, officials say they are confident digital services are playing a role in the recent rise.

“We do not know how much social media has contributed to the rise in STDs, but we believe it is a contributing factor,” the Rhode Island health department said in a statement to the Globe.

Recent studies from across the country have linked the proliferation of Web-initiated dating and sexual hookups to

growth in STD rates, and health officials in at least one other state, Utah, have voiced similar worries.

But other health officials say it is far from certain that online daters take more risks, and historical nationwide data show that STD prevalence spiked before online dating, and has fluctuated since its inception.

Kevin Cranston, director of the Massachusetts Department of Public Health's Bureau of Infectious Diseases, said officials here, where rates of some STDs have risen in recent years, have not seen conclusive data that link STD rates to use of dating apps.

"Rates in Massachusetts parallel national trends, and can be attributed to a number of factors, including more widespread routine testing," he said.

If it turns out that dating websites and apps are significantly affecting STD rates, that information could help health workers and the companies behind the services better target campaigns about safe sex practices.

Public health officials nationwide most closely track four STDs: chlamydia, gonorrhea, syphilis, and HIV/AIDS. New HIV infections nationwide have remained relatively stable since the mid-1990s, while the other STDs have increased in many places in recent years.

Syphilis infections in Rhode Island more than tripled between 2009 and 2014, while gonorrhea cases rose by 80 percent and chlamydia infections climbed 20 percent during that span. Nationally, between 2009 and 2013, chlamydia cases rose 13 percent, gonorrhea by 11 percent, and syphilis by 24 percent, according to the most recent available data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

In Massachusetts during that span, chlamydia cases rose 20 percent, gonorrhea by 57 percent, and syphilis by 51 percent, CDC data shows.

STDs, as they have been historically, continue to be more prevalent nationwide among certain groups, including young adults, men who have sex with other men, African-Americans, and Hispanics.

Rhode Island health officials believe using social media to arrange casual and often anonymous sexual encounters is one of just several high-risk behaviors that have become more common in recent years, the department said.

Recent increases in some STD rates may also be attributed to increasing prevalence of people having sex without condoms, multiple sex partners, and sex while drunk or high, officials said, citing anecdotal reports from health care providers.

Rhode Island officials did not identify specific apps or websites they believe could be involved. Representatives for several services declined to comment for this story or could not be reached.

A spokesman for Grindr, a dating app geared toward gay and bisexual men, provided a statement to the Globe that said the company is “highly committed to promoting safe sex within the community and strongly encourages our users to engage in safe sex practices, get tested, and know their HIV status.”

Grindr said it collaborates with other organizations to promote STD prevention and awareness, posts sexual health-related information on its website, and uses its app to send messages to users about safe sex practices and remind users to get tested, providing the location of the nearest test clinic.

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