

Love on the Web for STD sufferers

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While many are turning to the Internet for love, those with a sexually transmitted disease can now find themselves in less awkward position thanks to a new dating site, MatchSTD.com.

The free site launched only two weeks ago had about 150 members last Friday and as of Wednesday has ballooned into 3,000 members.

"We're averaging about 800 members a day," said co-founder Bentley Dawson. "This all happened so quickly. We went from pretty much nothing to 15,000 hits an hour, and as of today, we've gotten 35,000 hits in an hour."

As the online dating boom matures, more niche dating sites have begun to spring up along side e-dating giants including Match.com and Yahoo! Personals as the stigma of Internet romances diminishes.

A March study from the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that some 31 percent of U.S. adults reported they know someone who has used a dating Web site, while 15 percent or roughly 30 million people know someone who has been in a long-term relationship or married via the Internet.

The study of 3,215 adults also found that 11 percent of Internet users -- or 16 million people -- have used an online dating Web site and about 3 million have found long-term relationships or married someone via Internet Web sites and their services.

And in the online romance scene, those with infections may find themselves in a comprising and burdensome situation when it comes to revealing their secret.

So sites like MatchSTD as well as a handful of others including MPwH (Meet People with H) from the Antopia Herpes Network, which has some 54,090 members, reduces that burden, not only creating an online dating service but a social community.

Nationwide at least 45 million people ages 12 and older, or one out of five adolescents and adults, have had genital HSV infection, and about 40 million Americans are infected with genital warts.

And there were an estimated 42,514 AIDS diagnoses in 2004.

MatchSTD cofounders and friends Dawson and James Kassemi began developing the site two years ago intending to help infected friends with a variety of STDs from herpes and hepatitis to HIV/AIDS find love

while providing anonymity.

"The idea for this site came from growing up knowing people who had become infected with a STD, and watching how it affected them in their efforts to date," Dawson said.

One friend in particular had motivated to her get the site up and running, Dawson wrote in a letter to users. A girl was left heartbroken after falling in love with a man whom she had revealed her secret to and broke up with her out of disgust.

The response to the site has been great, Dawson says, hoping it will make those infected have an easier time finding love.

"It was created mostly because of the stories I would hear from my friends, and my desire to do something to make their life easier," she said. "The response has been amazing. We have been completely overwhelmed with e-mails from users, or just people that want to say what a great idea it is."

Once a member is registered with the site, they can search the world matching their profile preferences with others and are never forced to discuss their STD again.

Moreover, the site provides a proposal system in which, if one user is interested in another user, they must send one of the three communication proposals -- fling, friendship and relationship.

If the proposal is accepted, both users could communicate via the site's internal messaging system.

While Dawson does see room for harassment, she hopes that users won't abuse the service, since their aim was to have a gender-friendly site since

they also include transgender persons pre-operation and post.

Both Dawson and Kassemi hope to keep the site free for users making it self-sustaining through advertisements.

And they plan to expand it educationally to include articles and posts as well as a blog from a doctor about the latest on the STD health-news front.

"We want MatchSTD to be seen as free, safe, anonymous, and gender-friendly," Dawson said. "I hope that enough people will come to the site in a study fashion."

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