Age of casual hookups on campus means more get STDs

By Scott Travis, Sun Sentinel

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They meet, they mate, they move on — often in less than 24 hours.

Welcome to today's college romance, where hooking up is common, but shame and stigma are not. Indeed, the proliferation of social media makes casual relationships easy, and popular music and reality shows make them seem fun.

Florida Atlantic University student Danielle Portuondo, 20, says the Internet offers so many choices, it creates "dating A.D.D. You go on Facebook and say, 'Oh she's cute,' or, 'He's so hot. You flirt with someone and then change your mind about who you like.'"

There are still plenty of steady, monogamous relationships, students say. But as casual sex has become more prevalent, so has an unwanted consequence: The number of college-age students getting sexually transmitted diseases is up dramatically. Educators worry too many students are failing to use condoms, often because of alcohol, feelings of invincibility or misconceptions that birth control pills can protect them from diseases.

Despite stepped-up sex education, about 36,000 Floridians in their early 20s contracted chlamydia, gonorrhea or syphilis during 2010, nearly twice as many as a decade before. That reflects about 3 percent of all people in the age group. The number of new HIV cases has also risen over the past decade, although not as much.

"You often see hookups in media representations, but it's rare that you hear the characters talk about safe sex." said Courtney Weaver, an FAU sexual health educator.

Safe sex is even less likely to happen when alcohol is involved because it can lower both the inhibitions to try new things and the resolve to use protection, educators say.

"We know when kids drink, their judgment goes out the window," Sande Gracia Jones, a professor in Florida International University's College of Nursing and Health Sciences.

In South Florida, clubbing is a huge part of the culture, and alcohol abuse and underage drinking have risen among college-aged students in recent years, studies show.

But alcohol isn't always a factor in casual relationships. Students often hook up "to get what they need without being emotionally involved," Weaver said.

"I don't think the act [of hooking up] itself is a problem," said Alex Hernicz, 20, of Wellington,
who attends the University of Florida. "I think the problem is when people have disregard for the consequences."

Of course, hooking up is nothing new. Our grandparents told stories about the coed who got drunk at a fraternity party and ended up taking the "walk of shame" outside a stranger's dorm the next morning.

But in many cases, the shame isn't there anymore, students say.

"You have these shows on TV, like 'Jersey Shore,' that emphasize the constant sexual thing, and they show hooking up as perfectly normal," said Daniel Garrido, 22, a graduate student at Florida International University.

And the line between hooking up and dating has blurred. Some students have a casual encounter and then try to turn that into a relationship. And when it ends, they do it again.

"There's a lot of serial monogamy," said Albert Garcia, 26, an FIU senior who educates students about sexual health issues. "They're monogamous every couple of months and end up having four, five or six monogamous relationships in a year."

Social networking and dating sites offer lots of choices for potential mates. And since oversharing is the norm on such sites, many students think they know someone by their profile. If you're both fans of the "Twilight" novels or the cable show "Dexter," you may sense an instant connection, especially if you like the sexy bathing suit shot that was posted.

Smartphone apps such as Skout and Streetspark have also become a popular way for young people to hook up. The apps use GPS technology to locate people who might be ready to meet. You can open the app, say hi to someone, trade naughty photos, then meet a few minutes later.

"They feel like they're best friends and ready to have sex," Garrido said. "But they really don't know them because they've skipped a whole bunch of steps."

Garrido, who belongs to an FIU group that educates students on sexual responsibility, said he's troubled by what he sees as cavalier attitudes in a region that leads the nation in HIV infection rates.

"People are exposing themselves to all these things, and they don't even know it, or they're not thinking about it," he said.

FAU student Marque Bembry, 21, has had the same boyfriend since middle school and has no interest in hooking up. But she has many friends who do, and she has accepted it as a normal part of college life.

"If you're going to experiment, this is the age to do it," she said.