

Experts call for more safe sex education as gonorrhoea cases rise by a quarter in England

Ingrid Torjesen

London

In England last year there was a 2% rise in the number of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) diagnosed, reversing the small decline observed in 2010, according to figures from the Health Protection Agency.

The greatest increase has been in new infections of gonorrhoea, which rose by 25% (from 16 835 in 2010 to 20 965 in 2011), followed by a 10% rise in new cases of syphilis (from 2650 to 2915), and a 5% rise in new cases of herpes (29 794 to 31 154).

There were 426 867 new diagnoses of STIs in 2011, up from 419 773 in 2010. The highest rise was among men who have sex with men. Among heterosexuals, rates remained highest among young adults aged 15 to 24 years.

Gwenda Hughes, head of STI surveillance at the agency, said: "We anticipated some increase in diagnoses due to improvements in testing in recent years, but not on the scale seen here."

She told a press briefing: "The data on young heterosexuals and men who have sex with men are very concerning. We feel there are too many people practising unsafe sex and they are getting STIs and putting themselves at risk of longer term problems. It is crucial that the work to try and reduce rates of STIs continues, with the focus particularly on these groups.

"Improving awareness and encouraging safer sexual behaviour through health promotion and education are essential."

The agency's message to all people engaging in sexual activity is to always use a condom when having sex with a new or casual partner, and that men who have unprotected sex with men should have a HIV/STI screen at least annually and every three months if changing partners regularly.

The agency is especially concerned about the rise in gonorrhoea because of rising resistance to existing drugs and no new drug in the pipeline.

Cathy Ison, director of the sexually transmitted bacterial reference laboratory at the agency, told the briefing that treatment failures of single treatments were already starting to emerge, with one in France and another in Spain in the last month, raising the prospect of combined therapies having to be used in the future.

Paul Cosford, interim director of health protection services at the agency, told the briefing that society has tended to take the view that STIs such as gonorrhoea were treatable once identified.

"It really raises the importance of prevention because we are not certain how long the treatments for gonorrhoea particularly will continue to be effective," he said.

The 2011 data show a 4% drop in new cases of chlamydia in young adults, from about 154 000 new diagnoses in 2010 to 148 000 in 2011. But Angie Bone, director of the National Chlamydia Screening Programme, said that rather than reflecting a fall in prevalence, the decline was a result of falling numbers of younger adults being screened and consequently fewer cases being picked up.

"This is a trend we need to reverse," she said. "Our aim is to encourage all sexually active under 25 year olds to get screened every year, or on change of partner, so a hidden infection can be found and treated." Chlamydia may be asymptomatic and can have serious consequences for women, such as pelvic inflammatory disease, ectopic pregnancy, and tubal infertility.

The agency's data show that more people are being tested for STIs and that waiting times for tests have dropped. But there are fears that the transfer of responsibility for sexual health services (as part of public health) to cash strapped local authorities might see some health promotional activities on raising awareness of STIs and the importance of practising safe sex being cut, because unlike testing and treatment they are not mandatory services.

Simon Bowen, director of public health and regeneration at NHS Brent and London Borough of Brent, told the *BMJ*, "The question is how much a local authority might choose to put into local health promotion, HIV prevention, and some of those areas of sexual health which are discretionary."

In a joint statement the sexual health charities FPA and Brook said the statistics illustrated "a worrying reverse trend." It added, "It demonstrates exactly why safer sex messages and campaigns that young people and gay men will listen to and take action on, are absolutely necessary.

"The impact of the government's disinvestment in campaigning around safer sex and sexual health reflects in today's statistics. Yet again we see more data illustrating why there is an urgent need for statutory sex and relationships education in schools alongside sustained investment in sexual health services."

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2012;344:e3870

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