Among English Gay & Bi Men, Hep C Is Increasingly Seen in Those Without HIV

Traditionally hep C transmits sexually mostly among HIV-positive men who have sex with men.

April 17, 2019 By Benjamin Ryan

A new survey of English men who have sex with men (MSM) who were diagnosed with a recently acquired hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection found that 40 percent were HIV-negative, aidsmap reports.

Multiple studies have indicated that in Western nations, there has been a rising epidemic of sexually transmitted HCV among HIV-positive MSM since about the turn of the millennium. Hep C does apparently transmit sexually among MSM who do not have HIV but traditionally has done so at a much lower and more stable rate than among their HIV-positive peers.

More recent studies have found, however, that hep C is starting to spread among HIV-negative MSM at much higher rates, including in France and the Netherlands.

Presenting their findings at the 25th Annual Conference of the British HIV Association, researchers from the British study analyzed the 40 cases of MSM who were diagnosed with an HCV infection acquired within the previous 12 months and who were referred to three hepatitis clinics, in London, Brighton and Leeds in England.

Sixteen (40 percent) of the cases were in HIV-negative men and 24 (60 percent) were in HIV-positive men.

The HIV-negative men had an average age of 34 years old, compared with 36 years old among the HIV-positive men. The two groups reported an average of 36 and 16 condomless anal sex partners within the previous year, respectively.

Thirteen (81 percent) of the HIV-negative men were on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) or had taken it within the past year. Twenty-two (92 percent) of the HIV-positive men were on antiretroviral treatment and had an undetectable viral load.

About 30 percent of each of the HIV-negative and HIV-positive groups were diagnosed with another sexually transmitted infection at the time of their HCV infection. About 45 percent of both groups reported injection drug use, with 35 percent reporting having done so within the previous

year. All but one of the men who reported injection drug use said the last drug they injected was methamphetamine.

Eighty-eight percent of the HIV-negative men and 71 percent of the HIV-positive men reported engaging in group sex. A respective 71 percent and 54 percent of the two groups reported engaging in fisting. The differences between each of these pairs of rates were not statistically significant, meaning they could have been driven by chance.

Previous research has indicated that group sex and fisting are each associated with a higher risk of HCV sexual transmission.

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