HIV Transmission Rate Plunges in Gay & Bi Men in the U.K.

The diagnosis rate fell by 50 percent in just two years among gay and bi men who attended sexual clinics at least twice in one year.

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An analysis of diagnosis trends in a subset of men who have sex with men (MSM) who attend sexual health clinics in the United Kingdom revealed a fast-declining HIV transmission rate in recent years, aidsmap reports.

Presenting their findings at the 2019 Conference on Retroviruses and Opportunistic Infections (CROI) in Seattle, researchers analyzed HIV diagnosis data among MSM who attended the same U.K. sexual health clinic at least twice during the same year. This amounted to about one third of the group of MSM attending such clinics in any given year. Consequently, the findings about this group may not be generalizable to the overall MSM population in the United Kingdom.

During 2012 to 2013, 1.9 percent of the MSM in this group were diagnosed with HIV, a figure that held essentially steady at 1.8 percent during 2014 to 2015. By 2016 to 2017, the diagnosis rate had dropped by 56 percent, to 0.8 percent.

The diagnosis rate during these three time periods among those MSM who had an HIV-negative test and a bacterial sexually transmitted infection (STI) diagnosis during the past year—a group considered at higher risk of HIV—was 3.7 percent, 3.4 percent and 1.6 percent, respectively. That represented a 53 percent decline between the second and third periods.

HIV diagnoses declined among the MSM at the sexual health clinics even as STI diagnoses shot up dramatically. Between 2012 and 2017, the annual rate of gonorrhea diagnoses among MSM attending the sexual health clinics increased by 90 percent while chlamydia diagnoses increased by 80 percent and syphilis diagnoses rose by 160 percent. Among MSM attending the clinics in 2017, 12.1 percent were diagnosed with gonorrhea (one in three had a rectal infection), 9 percent were diagnosed with chlamydia (one in two had a rectal infection) and 2.7 percent were diagnosed with syphilis.

The U.K.'s sexual health clinic network has been particularly proactive in promoting test-and-treat programs to improve prompt diagnosis and treatment of HIV among MSM, thus helping to reduce the time that men spend living with transmissible virus.

Additionally, Truvada (tenofovir disoproxil fumarate/emtricitabine) as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has gained a significant foothold among British MSM, in part because many have bought generic versions of the medication online. Additionally, the government recently launched a national PrEP study meant to improve access as the National Health Service continues to hold out on covering Truvada for HIV prevention.

To read the aidsmap article, click here.

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