Syphilis Rises Among Gay Men, Possibly Fueling HIV Spread

June 5, 2014

The United States rate of primary and secondary syphilis has more than doubled since the turn of the century, with cases largely concentrated among men who have sex with men (MSM), MedPage Today reports. These figures are of particular concern in the context of HIV because syphilis, not to mention the sexual behaviors connected to its transmission, increases the chances of both transmitting and contracting HIV.

According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report, syphilis hit its historical low in 2000 when there were 2.1 cases per 100,000 Americans. By 2013, this figure had reached 5.3 cases per 100,000. Men accounted for an increasing percentage of these cases between 2005 and 2013, so that by the end of this period 91.1 percent of all primary and secondary syphilis cases were among them. In the areas of the country in which there was reporting on the sex (meaning man or woman) of the sexual partners of those who contracted syphilis, the proportion of cases that resulted from sex between men increased from 77 percent in 2009 to 83.9 percent in 2012.

An estimated 50 to 70 percent of those with primary and secondary syphilis also have HIV. Furthermore, high rates of men contract HIV after acquiring syphilis.

The CDC reports: “The resurgence of syphilis, coupled with its strong link with HIV, underscores the need for programs and providers to (1) urge safer sexual practices (e.g., reduce the number of sex partners, use latex condoms, and have a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has negative test results for sexually transmitted diseases); (2) promote syphilis awareness and screening as well as appropriate screening for gonorrhea, chlamydia, and HIV infection; and (3) notify and treat sex partners.”

To read the MedPage Today story, click here.

To read the CDC report, click here.

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