

Gays underestimate risk of STDs

by Bruce Hayes
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—Most gay men and lesbians feel they are at little to no risk of contracting a non-HIV sexually transmitted disease (STD), despite the fact that certain STD rates have risen more than 70 percent in the gay community in recent years, according to the results of a major survey conducted by the National Lesbian and Gay Health Association (NLGHA) and the makers of K-Y personal lubricant.

The survey analyzed attitudes and behaviors of more than 2100 gay men and lesbians in Denver, New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. The poll was fielded via pencil-and-paper questionnaires at Pride events in the four cities.

Besides a certain false sense of security, the study revealed a troubling lack of communication between gay men and lesbians and their health care providers about non-HIV STDs, which include chlamydia, gonorrhea, hepatitis, herpes, human papilloma virus (HPV) and syphilis. Equally disturbing were findings showing few gay men or lesbians are regularly tested for STDs, less than half have been vaccinated for hepatitis, and many have insufficient knowledge of the consequences of STDs, including the role they can play in the transmission of HIV.

"These findings should serve as a wake-up call to the gay and lesbian community and the health care professionals who serve them," said Beverly Saunders Biddle, executive director of the NLGHA. "Not only are gay men and lesbians largely unaware of — and unconcerned about — the threat of STDs, but their health care providers are not giving them the information they need to protect themselves."

Only 14 percent of survey respondents rated their own personal risk of contracting a non-HIV STD as being high or very high. Eighteen percent of the gay male respondents did so, while fewer than one in ten lesbians (nine percent) rated their risk of contracting an STD through sexual contact.

At the same time, however, more than a third of the gay men (37 percent) also said they never discuss the risk of STDs with their health care provider. Although respondents said a private physician was their preferred source of health care services, 36 percent of gay men and 44 percent of lesbians said their doctor never raised the subject of STDs with them.

"This survey points to the need for education targeting doctors and health care providers in the proper way to take a sexual history and proactively raise the issue of STDs with their patients," said Howard Grossman, MD, a New York City internist with a large gay practice. "Communication is vital to the success of STD prevention efforts and that dialogue must begin with doctor and patient."

Overall, only one third of the respondents think the STD threat for all Americans has reached crisis levels, despite the fact that 12 million new cases are reported each year in the US, rates that far exceed those of any other industrialized nation. In fact, half of the nation's most frequently reported diseases are STDs. Last year, the Institute of Medicine labeled STDs "the hidden epidemic," citing the enormous health and economic consequences (\$17 billion in 1994) they pose for the US.

The survey findings come in the wake of recent studies showing that rates of some STDs are rising dramatically among gay men. A report released in September of 1997 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) showed that the incidence of gonorrhea in gay men rose 74 percent between 1993 and 1996. This increase comes at a time when the overall incidence of gonorrhea in the US is declining.

The lack of concern about STDs revealed in the survey is troubling, particularly given the role STDs can play in facilitating the transmission of HIV. For example, people with syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia or herpes are three to five times as likely as others to become infected with the AIDS virus. In addition, those who have both HIV and another STD are more likely to spread the AIDS virus during sex.

In fact, the CDC's Advisory Committee for HIV and STD Prevention recommended in July that early detection and treatment of curable STDs should be implemented more widely as an HIV prevention strategy in the US due to "strong evidence" that STDs play a "cofactor role in HIV transmission." Besides increasing the risk of contracting HIV, STDs are also linked to cervical cancer, sterility, pelvic inflammatory disease and ectopic pregnancies in women and anal cancer in men.

But the survey revealed that awareness of these consequences and other facts about STDs was relatively low. In fact, less than half (48 percent) of the respondents considered themselves to be extremely or very knowledgeable about STDs, and a number of specific "knowledge gaps" emerged.

For example, more than a third did not know that:

- There is a demonstrated link between contracting an STD and the risk of contracting HIV
- Safer sex practices that help prevent HIV are the same safer sex practices necessary to prevent the transmission of STDs
- It is possible for gay men to contract gonorrhea in the throat from unprotected oral sex
- Lesbians have similar rates of STDs as heterosexual women
- A routine gynecological examination does not always include a screen for STDs, so it is necessary for most women to be specifically tested for STDs

Similarly, 26 percent of the respondents did not know that one way to reduce the risk of contracting an STD is to examine sexual partner(s) for the physical signs of an STD, such as sores, rashes or discharges in the genital area. About one in five did not know that symptoms of some STDs are not readily visible at the onset of the disease.

More than two thirds, however, recognized that using a latex condom or dental dam with a water-based lubricant reduces the risk of contracting STDs.

"The survey clearly shows that gay men and lesbians must take a more aggressive approach in seeking out health care providers who routinely offer STD counseling and testing," said Saunders Biddle. "The health and economic stakes are simply too high to let STDs remain 'the hidden epidemic.'"

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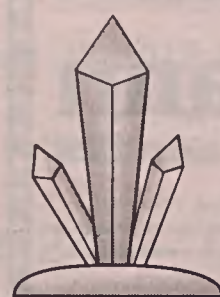
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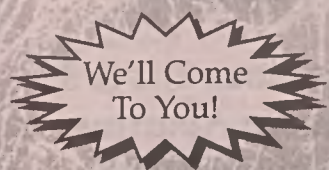
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