

# Sexually transmitted diseases: on the rise in Europe

## *EMHF Fact sheet*

- Sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) are becoming more common. In Western Europe, there are around 17 million new cases per annum. The equivalent figure for the rest of Europe is approximately 11 million
- The highest rates of STDs are found in urban populations between the ages of 15 and 35 years. Men tend to become infected at slightly older ages than women
- Overall, STDs are becoming more frequent in Eastern Europe while, in the West, there are significant regional variations in incidence
- For example, gonorrhoea is on the rise in Eastern European countries, but is generally on the wane in Western Europe
- However, since the mid-1990s, there has been a rise in gonorrhoea incidence in England and Wales. The increase has been around 35% in men and 32% in women. Sweden – where almost 80% of cases are among men – has also experienced an increase
- In 1999, there were around 2.5 million cases of gonorrhoea in European adults. Just under half were in men
- In the same period, there were around 7 million new cases of chlamydia in Europe. Men accounted for around 3 million of them
- Chlamydia particularly affects younger people. In women, it may lead to pelvic inflammatory disease, among other sequelae. In men, it may interact with testosterone during puberty, setting-off a chain of events that can lead to prostate cancer in later life
- Although rates of syphilis have declined in Western Europe, the incidence of the disease has increased in Eastern European countries in the last few years. In some nations, this increase has been in the order of 115–165 cases per 100,000 of the population
- STDs are not only generally troublesome infections with serious complications in their own right. They also increase the chances of a person contracting HIV.
- The growing incidence of STDs throughout Europe indicates a high level of unprotected sex and therefore an increasing risk of HIV infection
- The number of AIDS cases is still declining – albeit slowly – throughout Europe (thanks to powerful antiretroviral medications). The number of HIV diagnoses is not
- Homosexual men and injecting drug users are still at highest risk of contracting HIV in Europe. But the incidence of heterosexually acquired cases is rising

- In the UK, in 2000, there were more new cases of HIV cases acquired through heterosexual than through homosexual intercourse. (The figures were 292 vs 389 cases, respectively)
- However, there are variations across Europe. In Germany, for example, the equivalent figures were 328 (homosexual) vs 85 (heterosexual)
- In Eastern Europe, particularly in the former USSR, HIV infection rates are rising rapidly. Many of these new cases are ascribed to sharing needles. In these countries, injecting drug use is increasingly common in young people, particularly men
- Figures indicate that another group of men, gay males, may be increasingly at risk of contracting HIV and other STDs
- There have been outbreaks of gonorrhoea and syphilis among gay men in many European countries. These infections do not only increase the chances of HIV infection. They also indicate that risk-taking behaviours such as unprotected sex, which may result in HIV and other STD infections, continue to occur
- Gay men are at particular risk of other viral infections – eg Hepatitis A and B – as well as cancers such as lymphomas and Kaposi's sarcoma
- There is an urgent need to educate and inform men and women throughout Europe about the dangers of STDs

### Sources

1. WHO. Global prevalence and incidence of selected curable sexually transmitted infections. [www.who.int/HIV\\_AIDS/GRSTI/index.htm](http://www.who.int/HIV_AIDS/GRSTI/index.htm) accessed 1 June 2002
2. [www.avert.org/eurostat.htm](http://www.avert.org/eurostat.htm) accessed 28 May 2002

### The EMHF: tackling inequalities in men's health across Europe

The EMHF is an independent, non-profit-making, non-governmental organisation that aims to raise the profile of men's health at both a pan-European level and within individual countries. It encourages Europe-wide national, local and regional organisations (both governmental and non-governmental) to include men's issues in their health policies and practices. It also aims to improve delivery of health services to men and to influence men's health-related behaviours.

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