CDC Overhauls Treatment Guidelines for STIs

The agency emphasizes new therapies, prevention strategies and diagnostic advice for gonorrhea and other sexually transmitted infections.

July 26, 2021 By Kate Ferguson

Several months ago, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported a sustained increase in cases of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the United States that continued upward in 2019—for the sixth consecutive year. Now the agency has issued updated clinical guidelines that focus not only on the treatment of common STIs but also prevention strategies and diagnostic recommendations for these infections, according to healio.com.

This report updates the previous guidelines published in 2015 and supplements recommendations issued to clinicians for providing quality STI services to patients in primary care and specialty care settings.

“There are several important updates, but I would highlight the updates that build upon the adjustments to gonorrhea treatment that were made in December 2020 to ensure effective treatment and minimize the threat of drug resistance,” said Kimberly A. Workowski, MD, an author of the guidelines. “Effectively treating gonorrhea remains a public health priority.”

Increasingly common worldwide, gonorrhea is the second most commonly reported notifiable disease in the United States, according to the CDC. (Diagnoses of notifiable diseases must be reported to public health authorities.) In 2016, after health officials identified an extremely drug-resistant cluster of gonorrhea infections in Hawaii, the agency warned of an increased likelihood that gonorrhea would become untreatable in the near future.

What’s more, cases of this STI increased 56% between 2015 and 2019.

The CDC now advises clinicians to treat gonorrhea with a one-dose injection of 500 milligrams of ceftriaxone, one of a special class of antibiotics. Individuals treated for gonorrhea should get retested three months after completing therapy or 12 months after being first treated if they are unable to be tested at three months; providers should also treat people’s partners, the agency explained.

In addition, clinicians can now use rectal and oral tests approved by the Food and Drug

Administration to diagnose gonorrhea and chlamydia—the most commonly reported STI in the United States. According to Workowski, this is an important development "because infection at these sites is often without symptoms."

The new guidelines also discuss expanded risk factors for syphilis testing among pregnant women, one-time testing for hepatitis C infection, two-step testing for diagnosing genital herpes and vaccine recommendations for human papillomavirus, among other STI issues.

Read "Sexually Transmitted Infections Treatment Guidelines, 2021" for everything covered by the updated report.

To learn more about STIs, read "Can you get sexually transmitted infections from oral sex?"

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