

STRICT EMBARGO UNTIL 12.05.11, 00:01

BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR SEXUAL HEALTH AND HIV

MEDIA RELEASE

“Make hay not warts!” say Britain’s sexual health doctors

New research unveiled today (Thursday 12th May) at the British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) 9th Annual Spring Meeting in Gateshead1 reveals that people living in rural areas are taking greater risks with their sexual health, which may be putting them at a greater risk of STIs (sexually transmitted infections) than their urban counterparts.

The results of the study2 came from a survey of over 2200 patients attending sexual health clinics from across England. Researchers divided patients into four categories: urban, large commuter; urban, ethnically diverse; suburban; largely rural. Whilst similar numbers of sexual partners were reported by people in the different areas, a clear picture evolved of a more care free approach to condom use in rural areas than those in the urban categories:

- Nearly half of men and women in rural areas claimed they never used a condom with their most recent partner, compared to a third of men and women in urban areas.
- Over three quarters of men and women from rural areas either never used a condom or only used one the ‘first few times’ with their most recent partner, meaning that less than a quarter use a condom ‘almost every time’ or ‘every time’ with this partner.
- In urban areas four in ten people reported to use a condom ‘every time’, or ‘almost every time’ with their most recent partner.

The study suggests that people living in rural areas may be at greater risk of catching or passing on a sexually transmitted infection (STI) through having unprotected sex.

Dr Keith Radcliffe, President of BASHH commented:

“It is surprising that where you live, be it Bury St Edmunds, Birmingham or Bexley, affects the risks you take with your sexual health. This research highlights that people are making decisions about their sexual behavior, based on incorrect instinctive perceptions about levels of risk associated with their geographical location.”

He added “The perception that you are less likely to catch an STI in rural areas, where there may be more of a sense of community, is leading to people taking greater risks with their sexual health and, understandably resulting in a greater chance of contracting an STI.”
“What is clear is that education and information about good sexual health practices, as well as access to sexual health services, are just as important in rural areas than those more urbanized localities and we hope that this is taken into account as part of the NHS reforms and by the new public health teams within local authorities.”

Health Protection Agency (HPA) data show that in 2009 there were nearly half a million sexually transmitted infections recorded. Dr Gwenda Hughes, head of STIs at the HPA said: “The latest figures show that poor sexual health is a serious problem among the UK’s young adults and men who have sex with men. Re-infection is also a worrying issue. The safest way to protect yourself against an STI is to use a condom with all new partners.”

Ends

PRESS CONTACT DETAILS:

For further information, or to arrange an interview with one of the authors of the study, or a specialist in sexual health, please contact Harriet Smith, on behalf of BASHH, at Munro and Forster, harriet.smith@munroforster.com or on 020 7815 3900 / 07779645386

Notes to Editors:

1. The BASHH 9th Annual Spring Meeting is taking place at the Sage in Gateshead and is running from the 11th-13th May. It is expected to be attended by nearly 400 national and international leading clinical and research experts working across the sexual health field. The key themes for the meeting will include:
   - Vaccinating against STIs - lessons from abroad
   - When should HIV be referred to a tertiary centre
   - Complex contraception for the sexual health physician
   - Confidentiality and its limitations in the electronic age.
   - The Clinical implication of bacterial STI resistance in modern practice.
   - Changing Behaviour - What works and what doesn’t?
   - Detection and Management of Early HIV Infection
   - The Future of Genito Urinary Medicine in the New NHS.

For further information about the conference, or to download a conference programme, please see the following link: http://www.bashh.org/education_and_careers/bashh_spring_meeting


   Abstract:
   **Background:** Despite geographic variations in the diagnosed incidence of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in the UK, with rates highest in urban areas, the extent to which these reflect differences in sexual behaviour is unknown.
   **Objective:** To investigate whether geographical differences exist in genitourinary (GU) medicine patients’ sexual behaviour.
   **Methods:** Cross-sectional survey of 2203 patients (1877 heterosexual) attending four sociodemographically and geographically contrasting GU medicine clinics in England in 2009. Patients completed a questionnaire including questions on their recent sexual behaviour and partnerships, and which was linked to clinical data on STI diagnosis/es.
**Results:** Median partner numbers in the three months prior to attendance was one regardless of gender and clinic attended. However, 41% of men and 26% of women reported two or more partners during this time, with variation by clinic for men (Table O13). Thirty-nine percent of patients had never used condoms with their most recent partner, and this varied geographically and was most common in the rural clinic. Median partnership duration was 59 days among men and 122 days among women, varying by clinic for men only. Across all clinics, 52% of men and 65% of women anticipated sex again with this partner. The proportion of patients who had acute STI diagnosis/es varied by clinic: range 17–32% among men; 12–21% among women.

3. The British Association for Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) is the lead professional representative body for those managing STIs and HIV in the UK. It seeks to innovate and deliver excellent tailored education and training to healthcare professionals, trainers and trainees in the UK and to determine, monitor and maintain standards of governance in the provision of sexual health and HIV care. www.bashh.org

4. The Health Protection Agency is an independent UK organisation that was set up by the government in 2003 to protect the public from threats to their health from infectious diseases and environmental hazards. It does this by providing advice and information to the general public, to health professionals such as doctors and nurses, and to national and local government. From April 2012 the HPA will become part of Public Health England. For further information please visit: http://www.hpa.org.uk/