

“What is driving the recent increase in syphilis in heterosexual people?”

Findings from: [NEXUS: Sociodemographic, behavioural and attitudinal drivers of syphilis and other STIs/blood-borne viruses \(BBVs\) among heterosexual-identifying people in England](#)

What was the study about?

Syphilis diagnoses are increasing in England, and whilst most cases are in people who identify as gay or bisexual men, there has been a recent increase in cases in people identifying as heterosexual. Therefore, we looked at factors surrounding the rise of syphilis among those who identify as heterosexual.

Why is this important?

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection (STI) that can be effectively treated with antibiotics. However, if left untreated it can result in serious complications, leading to poor health. Therefore, it is important that syphilis is diagnosed and treated as soon as possible, to reduce the spread of syphilis and to reduce the negative effects of untreated syphilis infections. If we know what is driving the increase in syphilis in heterosexuals, we can target this.

What did we do?

- We interviewed heterosexual people who had been diagnosed with syphilis in the last year, and healthcare professionals in syphilis management to look at why syphilis is increasing in heterosexuals.
- We looked at behaviours that could contribute to the spread of syphilis.

Key findings

- Many people did not think that they were at a high risk of getting an STI and did not prioritise preventative measures such as condom use.
- There is a lack of syphilis awareness in some users of sexual health services and in some healthcare professionals who are not experienced in sexual health care.
- Many people diagnosed with syphilis were likely to change their sexual behaviours and to use preventative measures such as condoms.

What do these findings mean?

- We need to promote knowledge of syphilis, sexual health and the importance of using preventative measures such as condoms among heterosexual populations.
- We need to make sure that healthcare professionals that do not work in sexual health services are aware of syphilis, to improve detection of cases so that people are treated and to overall reduce the spread of syphilis.

Related publications not already linked to project:

<https://doi.org/10.1101/2025.05.06.25327060>