

A GUIDE FOR THE LEADERS OF COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (CBOs)
Increasing Awareness About Syphilis Among Men Who Have Sex With Men (MSM)





MOBILIZE.

With the rise in syphilis infections in men who have sex with men (MSM), your organization may already be actively involved with the Syphilis Elimination Effort (SEE), the national initiative to eliminate syphilis from the United States. As one of the leaders in a community-based organization that serves MSM, you are familiar with community mobilization techniques, strategies for raising awareness of HIV and other STDs, and prevention efforts. This booklet is intended as a reference or checklist to ensure that your organization is doing everything possible to educate MSM about the need for regular syphilis testing.

Public awareness about syphilis tends to be low unless there is an outbreak. Many people believe that syphilis is a “thing of the past.” The HIV/AIDS epidemic overshadows perceived health risks of syphilis and other curable STDs, but syphilis has a direct, dangerous link to HIV. A syphilis infection creates a two- to five-fold greater risk of getting and transmitting HIV.

Your organization is in a strategic position to incorporate education about syphilis prevention and treatment into programs about HIV/AIDS prevention and testing. Since sexually active MSM are at increased risk for syphilis and other STDs, it is important to expose them to these core messages:

- Syphilis increases the risk of contracting HIV two- to five-fold.
- Syphilis is preventable.
- Syphilis is curable.

Syphilis rates in the United States are at low levels, but beginning to rise, especially among MSM. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the overall rate of reported primary and secondary (P&S) syphilis cases has increased each year since 2001. Overall P&S rates during 2001 – 2003 increased in men but decreased in women, suggesting an increase in syphilis among MSM. CDC estimates that more than 60 percent of syphilis cases reported in 2002 were among MSM, and research suggests that a large percentage of MSM diagnosed with syphilis also have HIV.

Syphilis affects MSM of all social and economic levels and ethnic groups. Recent outbreaks among gay and bisexual men in cities, including Los Angeles, Seattle, San Francisco, Chicago, and Miami Beach pose new challenges to elimination efforts. Such outbreaks have been characterized by high rates of HIV co-infection. Furthermore, the use of crystal meth seems to be fueling the spread of syphilis.



QUICK FACTS ABOUT SYPHILIS

Syphilis is a systemic, sexually transmitted disease caused by the *Treponema pallidum* bacterium. It is transmitted person to person via vaginal, anal, or oral sex through direct contact with a syphilis chancre (sore). Although rare, it may be transmitted during foreplay, and congenitally (from mother to fetus). Syphilis can be cured by penicillin or another antibiotic. Left untreated, syphilis can lead to cardiovascular complications, neurological damage, blindness, hearing loss, and death.

Many infected people do not know they have syphilis, as early symptoms can go unnoticed. Regular testing is important so that infected persons do not pass syphilis on to others or progress to more harmful stages of the disease. MSM who have multiple sex partners should be routinely tested for syphilis. The test for syphilis is a simple, accurate blood test with results available in a few days. Syphilis is curable and eliminating syphilis can lower HIV transmission.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

If your organization is not already involved in the fight against syphilis and other curable STDs, please join SEE now. MSM are at increased risk for multiple STDs including, chlamydia, gonorrhea, and hepatitis A and B, as well as HIV and syphilis. The following suggestions can help you begin or expand your effort to educate MSM about the link between syphilis and HIV and the need for regular testing for those infections and other STDs.

Educate your staff

- Train your employees and volunteers on syphilis facts. You may want to direct your staff to online resources for syphilis information such as www.cdc.gov/std/Syphilis/STDFact-Syphilis.htm.
- Encourage staff to reinforce the message to your clients that syphilis is curable, but if left untreated, it can cause serious health problems, in addition to increasing the risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV.
- Promote a general policy of incorporating syphilis prevention and testing messages into HIV/AIDS-related discussion with clients.
- Alert staff to the variety of services available to MSM for comprehensive health care, including testing and treatment for STDs.
- Ask your staff to encourage MSM to talk with their physicians about MSM-related health issues and treatment options. CDC's "Sexually Transmitted Disease Treatment Guidelines 2006" offer recommendations on prevention, testing, and treatment for syphilis and other STDs that you may find useful for your prevention programs. It also includes recommendations for the detection, counseling and referral of HIV positive patients. The guidelines are available at www.cdc.gov/std/treatment.



Enhance your outreach

- Consider including syphilis information in your outreach kits, as well as the phone number and hours of operation for the local STD clinic.
- Contact your local health department for information and educational materials on the syphilis-HIV link and the need for regular testing for sexually active MSM.
- Display syphilis-related information in the office space of your organization.
- If possible, sponsor monthly syphilis testing at your facility. Consider partnering with the health department and other health care providers in your area.

Mobilize MSM businesses

- Talk to editors or managing editors of publications that target MSM, owners of MSM bars, bathhouses, clubs, gyms, bookstores, and other establishments. Encourage them to participate in syphilis elimination efforts.
- Encourage businesses with MSM patrons to put up posters and to distribute pamphlets in their places of business. Ask members of the MSM press to write articles or editorials about the syphilis-HIV link and its effects on the health of the MSM community.

Involve health care providers

- Contact public health department officials and offer to help them include syphilis testing at clinics and outreach venues, such as street fairs, sporting events, festivals, nightclubs, bars, and gay community centers.
- Help your health department disseminate syphilis information to health care providers in your area.

- No doubt your organization already has an established rapport with physicians, clinics, and other MSM-friendly health care providers. Contact members of this network and ask them to speak to MSM patients about syphilis outbreaks, symptoms, and consequences, and the need for regular testing. Although physicians are receptive to helping to eliminate a disease, some may not be aware of syphilis symptoms and treatment protocols. Others may not even think about it at all, perhaps due to the belief that syphilis is a disease of the past.

Connect with the religious community

- Talk with MSM-friendly religious leaders and brainstorm with them on how they can participate in syphilis elimination efforts.
- Although some ministers and priests are reluctant to discuss sex-related topics from the pulpit, they may be willing to participate in other ways, such as discussing syphilis as a “community” issue in their church bulletins or newsletters.

Partner with other CBOs

- Contact organizations you have worked with in the past and get them on board with syphilis elimination efforts. Together, brainstorm strategies to disseminate syphilis awareness messages to the widest possible MSM audience, including those who identify as heterosexual.
- Organizations serving specific populations such as African Americans, Hispanics, or non-Hispanic Caucasians should be involved. Inter-agency cooperation may also result in new funding opportunities.

Take syphilis prevention online

- If your organization has a Web site, consider adding syphilis prevention and testing messages to your HIV messages.
- Messages should address the fact that sexually active MSM should be tested for syphilis annually—or possibly more frequently—depending on risk behavior, number of partners, and HIV status. Many MSM believe that if they test negative once for HIV, syphilis, or other STDs, they never have to take the tests again. This is a common misconception.
- Include information that MSM can have syphilis and not know it.
- Use the Web to reinforce the point that unless sexually active MSM are tested regularly for HIV, syphilis, and other STDs, they risk passing those diseases on to others.
- Consider training staff members or volunteers to log on to Internet chat rooms, answer questions, and offer referrals. Studies have shown that Internet prevention efforts targeted at men seeking anonymous sex partners are effective. Both syphilis and HIV cases have risen in recent years among MSM who cruise the Internet for sex.

JOIN THE EFFORT

Syphilis increases the risk of contracting HIV two- to five-fold, and syphilis rates among MSM continue to rise.

SYPHILIS IS CURABLE

Teach your staff the facts about syphilis and educate your clients about the need for regular testing.



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How do I help MSM overcome the “one test is enough” mentality?

Testing negative for HIV does not mean that one should not be tested again if he engages in risky sexual behavior and has multiple partners. The same is true for syphilis. Routine testing for HIV and other STDs is the best way to ensure optimum health for sexually active MSM. You can make this point in your educational materials and during your outreach activities. Although syphilis is curable, it often goes undetected. Reinforce the message that failure to test regularly for syphilis and other STDs puts MSM at risk for serious health complications and puts them in a position to infect others.

Although HIV is widely discussed and accepted among MSM, some in the community perceive syphilis as “dirty.” How do I counter that taboo so that people will feel comfortable getting tested?

The best way to counter stigma attached to a disease is to have someone prominent speak out about the need for testing and treatment. Consider asking a local celebrity, policy maker, or community leader to appear at public press conferences, community events, and health fairs to promote syphilis awareness.

I want to help in the effort to eliminate syphilis, but my organization only has a limited budget. How can I promote syphilis awareness without taking funds away from HIV/AIDS?

You can partner with the public health department which can provide you with educational materials about syphilis. If your organization has an outreach kit, simply adding those materials to the HIV/AIDS information will spread syphilis awareness at minimal expense to your group. By asking other CBOs to participate in your effort, you may form creative cross-collaborations on funding opportunities. Additionally, CDC’s National Prevention Information Network (NPIN) maintains a searchable database of federal, regional, local, and private funding opportunities. Please visit www.cdcnpin.org/scripts/locates/LocateFund.asp.

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