



Stopping

Syphilis

among gay & bisexual men
in San Francisco

a community plan

executive
summary

The number
of syphilis
cases in
San Francisco
has increased
1000%
between
1999 and
2002...

THE STRATEGY

The best way to stop syphilis is for those who have it to be treated and cured. Those who have been exposed, and infected but do not yet have symptoms should receive preventive treatment.

Gay and bisexual men who are sexually active with multiple partners should get tested for syphilis every 3 - 6 months. If everyone did this, those who had syphilis could be treated and we would be well on the way to eliminating it.

Preventing the spread of syphilis is difficult because it is easily transmitted through most types of sex - oral, anal and vaginal. Using condoms reduces risk, but does not eliminate it. Avoiding having sex with anyone who has syphilis sores will help, but it is not always possible to see the sores.



Almost all new syphilis cases in San Francisco are among gay and bisexual men. Other cities around the nation and internationally have also seen dramatic rises in syphilis within their gay/bi communities.

The Sexually Transmitted Disease Section of the San Francisco Department of Public Health has been moving aggressively to combat the reemergence of syphilis. Gay community organizations and individuals have also been working to respond to the new syphilis epidemic. However, while our efforts are showing progress, the number of new cases continues to grow.

This plan requires the mobilization of city government, community organizations, and gay and bisexual men to overcome the increasing syphilis epidemic in San Francisco. It is only through the full participation of all those concerned and affected by this disease that success can be achieved.

The fact that syphilis has been shown to facilitate the transmission of HIV makes the goal of syphilis reduction that much more compelling. Gay and bisexual men, be they HIV+ or HIV-, have a vested interest in detecting and eliminating syphilis in our community.

THE BASIC FACTS

1 Syphilis is a sexually transmitted disease (STD) that is passed from one person to another through skin-to-skin contact during anal, oral or vaginal sex, when syphilis lesion/sores are present (even when unseen).

2 Open sores in early syphilis make it 2-5 times easier for HIV transmission to occur.

3 Early symptoms (1-12 weeks after becoming infected, usually within three weeks) include a painless ulcer or sore at the site of infection – the penis, scrotum, anus, vagina or mouth.

4 Possible later symptoms (4-24 weeks after becoming infected, usually within 12 weeks) include one more of the following: body rash on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet or a generalized body rash, fever, swollen glands and flu-like symptoms.

5 Left untreated, syphilis can cause severe headaches and hearing and vision loss as well as permanent heart and brain damage.

6 All symptoms will go away even without treatment, but one is still infected.

7 The test for syphilis is a simple, accurate blood test whose results are available in a few days.

8 Syphilis is curable.



THE PLAN

THE GOAL

Decrease syphilis cases in the gay community through:

- Increased community awareness
- Increased syphilis testing
- Increased early treatment
- Increased symptom recognition
- Increased healthcare provider collaboration

Increase health promotion

- Continue HEALTHY PENIS social marketing campaign.
- Expand Internet outreach online and in gay chat rooms.
- Continue to build coalitions with community businesses such as bars, sex clubs, adult bookstores and Internet sites.

Expand syphilis testing and monitoring activities

- Initiate free online testing program – www.stdtest.org
- Provide training and laboratory support to community organizations to make testing more accessible.
- Increase testing at events, bars, sex clubs and other community sites.
- Continue tracking the epidemic by investigating cases and collecting necessary data. Provide partner notification services for clients who require assistance.

Enhance clinical services

- Broaden the use of antibiotics (such as azithromycin) for preventative therapy.
- Increase azithromycin distribution through sex partners and field outreach.

Facilitate citywide medical provider participation

- Educate and motivate private providers to routinely test, examine and treat patients for syphilis.
- Distribute patient educational materials to providers, including HIV and early care clinicians, public clinics, emergency departments and other key areas of hospitals.

Policy Initiatives

- Support policies that result in improved sexual health for gay and bisexual men, including a Gay Men's Health Bill of Rights and same sex domestic partnerships.
- Promote screening guidelines – testing every 3 - 6 months for men with multiple sex partners.

Evaluation

- Monitor program activities/services quarterly to measure usage – clinic visits, tests administered, etc.
- Carry out client satisfaction surveys.
- Conduct surveys to determine changes in awareness, knowledge and behavior.

WHAT COMMUNITY MEMBERS CAN DO

Prevention

The most effective way to prevent syphilis is to be certain that the people you have sex with do not have syphilis. This can be accomplished by talking with your partners, getting a test and encouraging those you have sex with to get tested.

Proper use of latex condoms will reduce your risk in both anal and oral sex. Reducing the number of sex partners will also decrease your chances of getting syphilis. You can avoid sex with anyone who has symptoms, such as sores on penis, mouth or anus, but someone may have symptoms that you can't see.

Testing

Sexually active gay/bi men who have multiple partners should be tested for syphilis every 3-6 months. If you think you may have had sex with someone who had syphilis or if you have symptoms, get tested and treated right away.

Treatment

If you get syphilis you should stop having sex and get treated. If you continue having sex while being treated it is possible to get reinfected or infect others.

You also have a responsibility to tell your recent sex partners that they may have contracted syphilis from you. You can contact them yourself or you can give their name to the Health Department and they will confidentially contact them for you.

Preventative treatment with an antibiotic called azithromycin is available to give to your previous sex partners and sexually active friends. If they are infected with syphilis bacteria but do not yet have symptoms, this drug can help prevent them from developing an active syphilis infection. If they do have symptoms they will need to see a doctor.

Advocacy

Finally, we can all take on the job of making our community more aware of the current syphilis epidemic. You can speak with your doctor. You can tell your friends and sex partners what's going on. Pass this plan along or tell people about our web sites.

“...take on the job of
making our community
more aware...”

This plan was developed by the Sexually Transmitted Disease Prevention and Control Program of the San Francisco Department of Public Health in collaboration with the following Community STD partners:

Community STD Partners Committee

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Steven Tierney
Wendy Wolf *
Will Wong *

**Department of Public Health, STD Program*

Sponsoring Community Organizations

AGUILAS
Black Coalition on AIDS
California Dept. of Health Services - STD Control Branch
Good Vibrations
Harvey Milk Institute
HIV Assessment and Prevention service (HAPS)
HIV Prevention Planning Council
MAGNET
New Leaf

St. James Infirmary
San Francisco AIDS Foundation
Spikes Coffee & Tea's
Stop AIDS Project
The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association
The Stonewall Project
UCSF AIDS Health Project
UCSF AIDS Health Project - REACH Program
Walden House

RESOURCES

FOR FREE & CONFIDENTIAL TESTING / TREATMENT / INFORMATION

City Clinic

356-7th Street, San Francisco
Testing: Mon-Wed-Fri 8am-4pm
Tues 1pm-6pm
Thurs 1pm-4pm
Phone: (415) 487-5500

Online syphilis testing at www.stdtest.org

MAGNET

4122- 18th Street, San Francisco
Testing: Wed-Fri 4pm-8pm
Sat 1-5pm
Phone: (415) 581-1600
www.magnetsf.org

Positive Health Program West

3180-18th Street, Suite 301, San Francisco
Testing: Mon-Fri 10am-2:30pm

CDC National STD/AIDS Hotline

1 (800) 342-2437 24hrs day/7 days a wk

Web Sites

www.HEALTHYPENIS2003.org

Centers for Disease Control & Prevention
www.cdc.gov

California Department of Health Services
www.dhs.ca.gov