

Developments in Sexually Transmitted Infections: Global Epidemiology and Management

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Objectives

1. To show the frequency of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in society;
2. To discuss the clinical characteristics, and consequences, of STIs;
3. To review "how" STIs are transmitted;
4. To teach some basic epidemiologic principles.

Introduction

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are among the most common of infections, in part because about 30 microorganisms can be considered to be causes of STIs. They are, however, common for another major reason--most, whether in women or men, are asymptomatic. This tendency for them to be asymptomatic allows them to be widely transmitted, and those that tend to most often be asymptomatic tend to be most widely disseminated. If the STIs remained asymptomatic, there would be little morbidity but, unfortunately, STIs that are transmitted and initially asymptomatic often develop into sexually transmitted diseases, i.e., the infection causes illness. Thus, detecting and treating STIs is important, whether or not they are asymptomatic in a particular individual.

STIs are common in many parts of the world. It has been estimated that 1-2% of European adults acquire a curable STI each year (gonorrhoea, chlamydia, syphilis or trichomoniasis), but this percentage increases markedly in less developed parts of the world. Yet, most of us who are sexually active have likely had one of the 30 STIs--we simply do not know it. And, because many are prevalent infections with infection durations that are quite long, many of us are probably infected now.

The management of STIs depends upon recognising the syndrome that the STI may cause, e.g., a urethral discharge, knowing the possible microbiologic causes, and then treating them appropriately. Partner therapy, always a difficult area because of stigma and resource needs, is a difficult area of management of STIs, but essential to limit spread of STIs to others. Partner management can consist of testing for the STI, treating, or behavioural counselling to prevent the spread of STIs that cannot be cured.

Countries, or continents, have their own guidelines for managing STIs and Europe is no different. Leading guidelines for the management of STIs can be found in North America (the United States and Canada) and Europe.

Selected References for Further Reading

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, USA. <http://www.cdc.gov/std/>
This web site has links to a variety of useful sources of information, including the latest American STD Treatment Guidelines 2006.
2. European STI Treatment Guidelines. http://www.euro.who.int/aids/sti/20040122_1
This web link to the European Office of WHO has links to the current European STI Treatment Guidelines 2003, and other useful sources of information.
3. Lancet special issue on sexual and reproductive health. <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/donateresearch.htm>
This special 2006 issue contains six articles with up-to-date information of broad interest to individuals working in reproductive health.
4. WHO Guidelines to the Syndromic Management of STIs. http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/publications/rtis_gcp/syndromic_mngt.htm
This web site has the WHO guidelines to the management of STIs, and also additional useful information concerning reproductive tract infections.