

Embracing Innovation in Sexual Health for Men Who Have Sex with Men and Transgender Women

Adapting clinical guidelines and practice for a new era

Sexual health is the ability to embrace and enjoy one's sexuality throughout their lifetime and it is a critical component of physical and emotional health. Sexual health is intertwined with HIV and STI prevention and care. Too often, however, the focus has been on preventing disease to the exclusion of enabling people to experience pleasure and have agency over the intimate parts of their lives. For more than a decade, highly effective drug regimens have been available to prevent HIV acquisition, but limited uptake has meant that the population-level prevention potential of PrEP has not been fully realized. Men who have sex with men (MSM, including transgender men who have sex with men) and transgender women always have been among the most heavily impacted by HIV and have had higher rates of common STIs than other populations. They also have unique needs that must be met to achieve population health.

A growing array of longer-acting PrEP options that require dosing as little as a couple of times a year, as well as new STI prevention tools (i.e. doxycycline as post-exposure prophylaxis, known as DoxyPEP), are raising questions about the importance

of regular screening for gonorrhea and chlamydia among MSM and transgender women and, more broadly, about how current clinical guidelines and practice should evolve and stay relevant to the lives of people during this period of expanding HIV and STI prevention and treatment options.

The uptake of these interventions is predicated on having a clinical workforce that is knowledgeable in how to best deliver at scale and a population that has access to the tools that best fit their lives. Updated screening guidelines should focus both on the evidence backing its effectiveness, and the sexual health of communities that it is intended to serve. This new biomedical toolkit to treat and prevent HIV and STIs also affords an opportunity to break with the fear- and risk-based sexual health communication of the past, and embrace sexual health messaging that centers pleasure, connection, and overall well-being. Future messaging must ensure we adapt our clinical programs to expand options while remaining grounded in evidence, and that we prioritize the parts of our communities with the greatest barriers to engagement and good health outcomes.

NEW CLINICAL TOOLS TO SCREEN, PREVENT AND TREAT HIV AND STIS CAN IMPROVE COMMUNITY HEALTH

Innovative HIV and STI prevention and treatment options and new diagnostic supports give individuals more options and demand new approaches to accommodating user preferences and to supporting clinical providers.

SCREENING GUIDELINES AND CLINICAL PRACTICE

Research is needed to better inform practice in terms of who needs to be screened and treated for HIV and STIs, and how often

There is a need for simplified screening guidelines that adapt to differing needs of MSM and trans women compared to lower incidence populations

When adjusting screening intervals, providers should prioritize frequent syphilis and HIV screening for MSM not on PrEP and others in higher-incidence sexual networks

PRIORITIZING COMMUNITIES WITH THE GREATEST HIV AND STI UNMET NEEDS

Meaningful community engagement must drive the ongoing refinement and evolution of HIV and STI services delivery models to increase population-level impact

Greater policy focus is needed on addressing the needs of uninsured and under-insured individuals

Existing technologies such as telehealth and at home self-collection/over-the-counter (OTC) self-testing need to be deployed at greater scale to overcome barriers such as stigma and transportation

COMMUNICATING COMPLEX SEXUAL HEALTH MESSAGES

Health departments and medical societies need to partner with communities to develop simple and effective sexual health communications. This is essential to build trust and confidence in messaging, at a time when trust in public health is fading.

Community partners must be broadened to include influencers, party/event hosts, and other public figures, as well as other corporate partners such as app developers and others

Sexual health messaging must emphasize pleasure, self-agency and not exclusively focus on disease prevention