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HIV and STI trends in Wales

Surveillance Report, November 2019

Author: Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre

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v1

Status: Approved

Intended Audience: Health professionals

Purpose and Summary of Document:

This report summarises trends in the epidemiology of sexually transmitted infections (STI) in Wales up to the end of December 2018.

It is accompanied by a data tables release, slide set, infographics and notes on interpretation.

Publication/Distribution:

- Publication on Public Health Wales intranet and internet
- E-mail notification of publication to stakeholders
- Link from Public Health Wales e-Bulletin
- Publication in Public Health Wales Document Database (Community surveillance)

Key trends

General trends

- There is continued transmission of sexually transmitted infections in Wales. In 2018, there were 13,044 diagnoses of sexually transmitted infections with the most common in chlamydia 53%, first episode genital warts 22%, first episode herpes 13% and gonorrhoea 11%.
- Diagnoses of syphilis and gonorrhoea each increased by around 20% and first episodes of genital herpes by 17% between 2017 and 2018. HIV diagnoses decreased by 19% and first episode of genital warts decreased by 5%, whilst diagnoses of chlamydia remained stable.
- LGV increased markedly in 2018 in Wales, with the highest annual number since the beginning of LGV surveillance in 2003: 13 laboratory-confirmed reports compared to an average of three per year between 2013-2017. LGV is caused by the invasive L1, L2 and L3 genovars of *Chlamydia trachomatis*, and affects mainly men who have sex with men (MSM).
- Gonorrhoea diagnoses in SHCs increased by 21% in 2018 compared to 2017. This increase was seen in all age groups and in heterosexual men, but MSM were the main group affected, with a 44% increase.
- After a 3-year upward trend, the gonorrhoea diagnoses in women attending SHCs have stabilised. However, laboratory reports (which include tests from all healthcare settings across Wales; including primary care, hospitals and other settings as well as SHCs) indicate that gonorrhoea also increased in women, by 12%.
- Syphilis diagnoses in SHCs increased from 208 cases in 2017 to 247 in 2018 (a 19% increase). Diagnoses increased in all gender-sexuality groups: both in men and women; and in MSM as well as heterosexual men. The main increase was seen in men aged 15-34. Age group trends in women need to be interpreted with caution due to small numbers.
- The increase in syphilis in recent years was steeper in Wales than in England (79% vs. 27% increase between 2016 and 2018). However, diagnoses per 100,000 population remain higher in England. In 2018 in Wales there were 7.9 syphilis diagnoses per 100,000; the corresponding rate in England was 13.6 per 100,000.
- Diagnoses of first episodes of herpes increased by 17% between 2017 and 2018. Most of the increase was due to an increase in cases in women; there was also an increase in heterosexual men.
- Laboratory reports of chlamydia from all healthcare settings remained stable in 2018 compared to 2017, as well as the number of individuals tested.
- Diagnoses of first episodes of warts in SHCs declined by 5% between 2017 and 2018, continuing in a declining trend of the last decade. The decline is predominantly seen in females aged 15-24 and may be related to already established HPV immunisation programme in young women. However, there was an increase in women aged 50 or above (43% increase, from 47 to 67).
- The number of HIV diagnoses reported from SHCs across Wales decreased by 19% in 2018 compared to 2017, whilst HIV testing in SHCs increased slightly. Data on new HIV diagnoses reported from all settings across Wales is available up to 2017, with a notable fall of 19% from the previous year, and the number of diagnoses being the lowest in the past 15 years (Public Health England data, PHE).

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- Resistance to first line antimicrobials in gonorrhoea remains a concern. As reported by the Gonococcal Resistance to Antimicrobials Surveillance Programme (GRASP), between 2017 and 2018 there was a reduction in ceftriaxone susceptibility in *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* isolates; and three cases of extensively drug-resistant *Neisseria gonorrhoeae* were identified in UK residents in 2018. In Wales, there were two reports of high-level azithromycin-resistant *N.gonorrhoeae* in 2018; and there have been no reports of dual ceftriaxone and azithromycin resistance.
- Looking at longer-term trends, between 2011 and 2018, there were increases in syphilis (261% increase), herpes (73%), and HIV (28%) diagnoses in SHCs, whilst diagnoses of warts decreased by 17%. Laboratory reports from all healthcare settings indicate a 135% increase in gonorrhoea and a 17% in chlamydia positive individuals.

Variation in specific groups and areas

- Young people continue to be the most affected by STIs. In 2018, for example, the age-specific population rates for gonorrhoea diagnoses in SHCs in 15-24 year olds was 154.8 per 100,000, whilst in the population as whole the rate was 44.9 per 100,000. This age group also had the highest rates of chlamydia, warts and herpes; whereas syphilis and HIV rates were highest in 25-34 year olds.
- Annual trends in 15-24 year olds were similar to those in the population as a whole in general, although the 2018 increase in syphilis was more marked in this group (100% increase, from 27 to 54); as well as the decreases in warts and HIV.
- A high proportion of STI diagnoses are in men who have sex with men (MSM). In 2018, 62% of all syphilis diagnoses, 55% of all HIV diagnoses and 43% of all gonorrhoea reported in SHCs were in MSM. Although this shows the increased risk in MSM, it is worth highlighting that around half of the diagnoses are not in MSM.
- In the period 2014-2018, STI rates were highest among people of black ethnicity, particularly those not self-defining as black Caribbean or African (i.e. black “other”) being the most affected.
- The rates of testing and the incidence of STIs vary by geographical location in Wales. The rates of gonorrhoea and chlamydia infections per 100,000 population were highest in the local authority of Cardiff; followed by Newport. The percentage of gonorrhoea tests from SHCs for which a positive diagnosis was reported was highest in Cardiff residents. For chlamydia however, the percentage positivity was highest in Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil residents.
- It is worth noting the 2018 increase in syphilis in Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board amongst females (n=10). Public Health Wales is monitoring this increase.

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