

This factsheet provides information on the incidence and trends of the main sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including HIV and AIDS in Northern Ireland.

Services and sources of statistics

In 1916, a report from the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases recommended establishing a free, confidential, open access service for the diagnosis and treatment of venereal diseases (VD). These clinics became part of the National Health Service in 1948. Unlike the previous term 'VD', the term sexually transmitted infections' encompasses the whole range of STIs. Clinics are now known as genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinics. There are four GUM clinics in Northern Ireland in Belfast, Coleraine, Derry and Newry providing free, confidential sexual health services including the diagnosis and treatment of STIs. Referral by a general practitioner is not required.

In 1999, responsibility for monitoring changes in the incidence, prevalence and patterns of communicable disease (including HIV and AIDS) in Northern Ireland was transferred from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) to the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (Northern Ireland) (CDSC

NI). CDSC provides a similar service throughout England and Wales.

Current trends

Although sexual behaviour changed in the UK in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic, safer sexual practices have not been sustained. This is illustrated by:

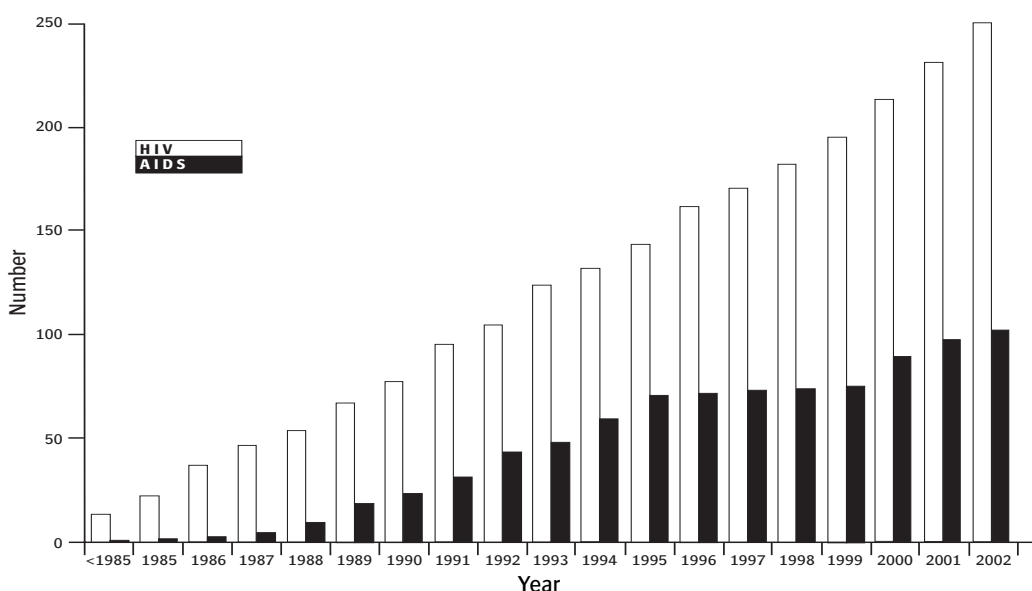
- the general increase in new sexually transmitted infections being diagnosed at GUM clinics;
- the recent outbreaks of syphilis;
- the increase in diagnosis of sexually transmitted infections in men, in particular gonorrhoea and syphilis;
- the specific increase in gonorrhoea in the heterosexual population;
- the increase in diagnoses in teenagers and young adults under 25 years.

The number of new STIs diagnosed has risen from an annual total of 6,000 in 1991/92 to over 11,300 in 2001.

HIV and AIDS

The following statistics relate to the year 2002. Figure 1 shows the incidence of HIV in comparison with the incidence of AIDS.

Figure 1: HIV and AIDS - cumulative total by year of diagnosis 1985-2002, Northern Ireland



Source: Review of Communicable Diseases 2002, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (Northern Ireland)



Published by *Sexual Health Information*, a partnership between the Family Planning Association for Northern Ireland and The Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland



HIV in the United Kingdom

As Table 1 indicates, by the end of December 2002 a total of 54,193 HIV infections had been reported in the UK.

Table 1: HIV infection - cumulative data to end 2002, United Kingdom

Region	Total HIV infected individuals	Cumulative rate per 100,000 population
England	49,787	101.23
Wales	761	26.21
Scotland	3,395	67.04
Northern Ireland	250	14.83
UK	54,193	92.11

Source: PHLS AIDS and STD Centre, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, and Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health. Quarterly Surveillance Tables No 57.

HIV in Northern Ireland

As Table 1 shows, by the end of 2002 a total of 250 HIV infections had been reported in Northern Ireland. It is important to note that these statistics exclude those first diagnosed

and reported elsewhere in Great Britain but who may now reside in Northern Ireland.

As Table 2 shows, the main risk factor for acquiring HIV in Northern Ireland is sex between men.

Table 2: HIV cases by exposure category to end 2002, Northern Ireland

Exposure category	Male	Female	All
Sexual intercourse			
Between men	144	-	144
Between men & women	37	35	72
Injecting drug use	4	3	7
Blood/tissue factor or blood factor	19	1	20
Other/undetermined	3	4	7
Total	207	43	250

Source: PHLS AIDS and STD Centre, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, and Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health. Quarterly Surveillance Tables No 57.

AIDS in the United Kingdom

In 2002, 510 new cases of AIDS were diagnosed. By the end of 2002 the cumulative total for AIDS cases was 19,159. As Table 3 shows, over 63% acquired the HIV infection from sex between men.

Table 3: United Kingdom: data cumulative to end 2002 - AIDS cases by country and region of report and exposure category

Country and region of report		How HIV infection was probably acquired								Total		
		Sex between men		Sex between men and women		Injecting drug use		Blood/tissue transfer or blood factor			Other/undetermined	
		M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F		M	F
English regions	North East	153	37	32	7	4	48	3	8	1	293	
	Yorkshire & Humberside	346	118	103	36	9	21	5	16	7	661	
	East Midlands	233	113	79	31	14	60	2	17	9	558	
	Eastern	258	71	66	22	7	29	2	9	11	475	
	London	7,910	1,260	1,327	307	126	180	45	252	161	11,568	
	South East	1,102	184	178	61	18	136	13	36	20	1,748	
	South West	478	79	42	22	13	38	2	17	9	700	
	West Midlands	335	69	71	10	6	50	4	16	9	570	
	North West	703	91	67	42	16	87	17	24	11	1,058	
England (total)		11,518	2,022	1,965	538	213	649	93	395	238	17,631	
Wales		165	30	29	6	4	32	3	12	3	284	
Northern Ireland		57	14	9	2	2	12	1	2	3	102	
Scotland		433	112	110	286	111	48	6	23	13	1,142	
Total UK		12,173	2,178	2,113	832	330	741	103	432	257	19,159	
Channel Islands/Isle of Man		4	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	7	

Source: PHLS AIDS and STD Centre, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, and Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health. Quarterly Surveillance Tables No 57.

AIDS in Northern Ireland

In 2002 four new cases of AIDS were diagnosed. By the end of 2002 the cumulative total for AIDS cases was 102. As Table 4 shows, approximately 56% of those infected acquired the HIV infection from sex between men.

Table 4: AIDS cases by exposure category to end 2002, Northern Ireland

Exposure category	Male	Female	All
Sexual intercourse			
Between men	57	-	57
Between men & women	14	9	23
Injecting drug use	2	2	4
Blood/tissue factor or blood factor	12	1	13
Other/undetermined	2	3	5
Total	87	15	102

Source: PHLS AIDS and STD Centre, Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre, and Scottish Centre for Infection and Environmental Health. Quarterly Surveillance Tables No 57.

Young people and STIs

The *Towards Better Sexual Health Survey*, published by **fpaNI** in December 2002, focused on young people under 25 years of age.¹ The research found that, of the young people surveyed, just 2.6% said they had visited a GUM clinic. Of these, 20 respondents went for a check-up and six had been treated for an STI. Of those who had attended a GUM clinic, 2.7% said they had received an HIV/AIDS test. Marginally more young women than young men had attended a GUM clinic and received treatment. There was no significant difference in clinic attendance and treatment between respondents who had one lifetime sexual partner and those who had multiple partners. However, respondents who had their first sexual intercourse when they were over 16 years old were twice as likely to have gone for a check-up or for treatment at a GUM clinic. Hence, those young people who are statistically more likely to have multiple sexual relationships, and are therefore at a higher risk of contracting an STI, were actually less likely to attend a clinic.

Respondents who held a third-level qualification were significantly more likely to attend a clinic for an STI test or treatment than respondents with lower educational qualifications. Young people currently attending school or colleges of further or higher education were least likely to have sought treatment or a check-up at a clinic.

Other sexually transmitted infections

STIs are diagnosed and treated in GUM clinics, general practice, hospital departments such as gynaecology, and at family planning clinics. STIs are not regarded as a notifiable disease; however, the four GUM clinics are required to provide data to DHSSPS. These reports to the DHSSPS provide the most comprehensive and reliable source of data.

The following statistics relate to the year 2001, the latest date for which official statistics are available from CDSC.

Infectious syphilis

There were 11 cases of primary and secondary infectious syphilis reported in Northern Ireland. In England there were 696 new cases.

Gonorrhoea

In Northern Ireland there were 148 new reports of uncomplicated gonorrhoea; 86% were males compared to 70% in England. Eighty eight (60%) were aged 20-34 years; 28 (19%) were in the 16-19 age group.

Chlamydia

A total of 947 diagnoses of uncomplicated chlamydia infections were reported in Northern Ireland; 50% in males compared with 43% in England. Approximately 70% were aged 20-34 years; 196 (21%) were in the 16-19 age group of whom 76% were female.

In the UK the rates among females in the 16-24 age group have steadily increased between 1993 and 2001.

Obtaining accurate estimates of the true prevalence of chlamydia is difficult as the infection often shows no symptoms and therefore remains undiagnosed. British studies (Northern Ireland was excluded) in which selected populations of women were screened show a variation in prevalence of between 2% and 12%.² In the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles in Great Britain³, 3,569 people were tested for chlamydia. Of these, 2.2% of men and 1.5% of women were found to have the infection.

Anogenital warts

There were 2,130 diagnoses (first attack) reported in Northern Ireland; 52% were in males. The proportion of cases was greater in 25-34 year old men and in 20-24 year old women.

The overall rate of STIs in Northern Ireland is considerably lower than in England with the exception of anogenital warts. The rate of first attacks of anogenital warts in Northern Ireland is on a par with the rate reported from GUM clinics in England.

Government policy

DHSSPS has an AIDS/HIV policy ⁴ and some Health Boards and Trusts have developed specific sexual health strategies. DHSSPS plan to have a sexual health strategy for Northern Ireland in place by 2003.

Except where stated, the statistics quoted in this factsheet have been provided by the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (Northern Ireland), Belfast City Hospital, Lisburn Road, Belfast BT9 7AB.

References

1. **fpaNI**, University of Ulster. Towards Better Sexual Health: a survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyles of young people in Northern Ireland. London: **fpa**, 2002.
2. Department of Health. Chlamydia trachomatis: summary and conclusions of CMO Expert Advisory Group. London: DoH, 1998.
3. Fenton K et al. Sexual behaviour in Britain: reported sexually transmitted infections and prevalent genital chlamydia trachomatis infection. *Lancet* 2001: 358; 1851-1854.
4. Department of Health and Social Services. HIV and AIDS in Northern Ireland: A Strategy. DHSS, 1993.

Other Northern Ireland factsheets are:

Sex education in schools

Teenage pregnancy

Abortion

The legal position regarding contraceptive advice and provision to young people

Family planning services in Northern Ireland

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