

Increase in drug-resistant Shigella cases among gay and bisexual men

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New UKHSA data shows that sexually transmitted Shigella cases in England continue to occur at high levels, with over 2,500 diagnoses in 2025.

New figures published today by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) show that sexually transmitted Shigella cases in England continue to occur at high levels with 2,560 diagnoses in 2025 – a rise from 2,052 in 2023 and 2,318 in 2024.

Shigella is a gut infection spread through bacteria found in faeces. It can be passed on during sex, directly or through unwashed hands, with only a tiny amount of bacteria needed to cause infection.

Sexually transmitted Shigella predominantly affects gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (GBMSM). Symptoms usually appear within 1 to 4 days and include diarrhoea (sometimes with blood), stomach cramps and fever. It is often mistaken for food poisoning.

Alongside rising case numbers, today's data also shows a serious and growing problem with antibiotic resistance. There are several strains of Shigella, but the 2 most commonly spread through sexual contact among GBMSM in England are Shigella sonnei and Shigella flexneri.

In 2025, 86% of Shigella sonnei samples and 94% of Shigella flexneri samples tested showed resistance to antibiotics. More than half of Shigella sonnei cases were extensively drug-resistant (XDR). While most cases of shigella will resolve without treatment, more severe cases do require treatment and the options available are becoming limited (these figures come from a subset of samples sent for detailed resistance testing, rather than all diagnosed cases).

Dr Katy Sinka, Head of STI section at UKSHA said:

The rise in sexually transmitted Shigella cases is concerning, but the risks of catching it can be reduced by good hygiene during and after sex and condom use – helping to protect yourself and your partners

It is important that gay and bisexual men do not dismiss their symptoms and advice on self-care and preventing dehydration can be found on the NHS website by searching Dysentery.

Those diagnosed with Shigella may also have been exposed to other sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, so a sexual health screen – at a clinic or by ordering tests online – is recommended.

If you have been diagnosed with Shigella, it's important to give yourself time to recover, keep hydrated and get lots of rest. You should avoid having sex until 7 days after your last symptom and avoid spas, swimming pools, jacuzzis, hot tubs and sharing towels, as well as preparing food for other people.

UKHSA has also published the latest provisional quarterly STI surveillance data for England. These

show overall diagnoses of gonorrhoea and syphilis at sexual health services. While these figures covering July to September 2025 - show a reduction in both gonorrhoea (15,910 diagnoses, down from 16,290 the previous quarter) and infectious syphilis (1,860 diagnoses, down from 2,090), there is a growing concern about antibiotic-resistant gonorrhoea. The number of ceftriaxone-resistant gonorrhoea cases more than doubled in 2025 (29 cases) compared to 13 the previous year.

Both gonorrhoea and syphilis are still occurring in high numbers. If you are having condomless sex with new or casual partners and experience symptoms of an STI, testing for STIs and HIV is essential to maintain good sexual health. Testing is free and available through local sexual health clinics, university and college medical centres or through self-sampling kits sent discreetly through the post.

Background

Sexually transmitted shigella figures are based on reports of laboratory diagnoses from adult men with no recent history of international travel — Because routine laboratory data does not record sexual orientation, this approach is used as an indicator of cases likely acquired through sexual transmission in England, primarily among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men.

Untreated gonorrhoea can lead to serious health issues, including pelvic inflammatory disease and infertility. Syphilis can cause severe, irreversible, and potentially life-threatening damage to the brain, heart, or nervous system if not treated.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/increase-in-drug-resistant-shigella-cases-among-gay-and-bisexual-men>