

Text alerts lead to fall in sexual infections

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A text message that read "you have been identified as someone at risk of gonorrhoea" has been linked to a fall in sexually transmitted infections.

The messages were sent anonymously by thousands of people to their former sexual partners. Since the introduction of the free web-based service, the number of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in London has declined, according to Public Health England (PHE).

The service, called SXT, allows newly diagnosed patients to provide the phone numbers of past sexual partners. The former partners then receive a text message telling them that they are at risk and that they should get tested.

The PHE report said that STIs fell by 5 per cent in London last year, with decreases among most of the five major infections. New cases of gonorrhoea fell by 19 per cent. Prior to the report, gonorrhoea had been steadily increasing since 2009. A 15 per cent rise in the number of gonorrhoea cases in London in 2015 meant that the capital made up nearly half of all cases in England. Between 2012 and 2016 there had been a 36 per cent rise in gonorrhoea.

Yvonne Doyle, regional director for PHE London, said: "London has turned the tide on an eight-year surge of gonorrhoea."

Anatole Menon-Johansson, founder of SXT, said: "People often feel embarrassed about telling partners that they've been infected but this eliminates that stigma. The SXT partner notification service has helped to contribute to the fall in STIs in London."

He welcomed the report and said: "It's an important signal and we hope the movement keeps momentum. The drop in STI rate means we are doing more testing, but we still need more partners to be told and to get tested."

SXT launched the text messaging service, which has been used by more than 5,000 people, in January 2016, with funding from PHE, the Cabinet Office impact readiness fund and *The Big Issue's* social entrepreneurs' fund Big Issue Invest.

According to SXT, a third of the sexual partners of those infected with gonorrhoea are infected themselves.

Cases of genital warts also fell by 5 per cent, while genital herpes fell by 2 per cent. Unlike other infections, cases of chlamydia, the UK's most-common STI, increased by 1 per cent last year.

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