

Safer sex in Suffolk - as cases rise, our pensioners are bucking national STI trend

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Over 65s have faced stark warnings in recent weeks, having been pointed out as the age group with the highest rising cases of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) nationally.

Findings published in a report by the Local Government Association entitled 'Breaking point: Securing the future of sexual health services' found that attendance at sexual and reproductive health services is 'skyrocketing' due to changes in people's lifestyles and sexual behaviours.

It highlighted that in the over-65 age bracket, the number of STIs has increased by 20% since 2017.

But is that the case closer to home?

Suffolk-based consultant GU physician and director of medical education Dr Sarah Edwards says: "We've not noticed a big increase in our clinic population, and we get sporadic referrals in the over-65s."

"I work in Bury St Edmunds which has a very different demographic to Ipswich or Lowestoft for instance, so there's always going to be different pockets of populations. We rarely get a uniform approach of what we see, and there will be a number of factors that work with this. For example, we see higher rates of STIs in less affluent areas, but overall I don't think we've seen that much more in this region."

The county appears to have some of the lowest overall rates in England according to data from Healthy Suffolk, which found that in 2020 there were 3,021 new diagnoses of STIs in Suffolk (a rate of 397 diagnoses per 100,000 population), which is significantly below both the East of England (427 per 10,000 population), and the England average (562 per 100,000 population).

"What puts you at risk of an STI is having unprotected sexual intercourse, and there is less autonomy when there's no risk of pregnancy as is there in the over-65s," Dr Sarah says of the national statistics relating to people of pensionable age.

"Another factor however is the change in relationships. What puts you at a higher risk of an STI is having more than one sexual partner in a year. If you only have sex with the same partner and are mutually monogamous, there's no one to bring an STI into a relationship. But we're seeing more changes in relationships, and anecdotally speaking, often when the kids leave home, many couples realise they don't get on and now would be a good time to separate.

"This age bracket comes from



STI rates have risen in the over-65 category, according to national statistics. Inset, Consultant GU physician and director of medical education Dr Sarah Edwards

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an era where there wasn't the same level of sex education as there is today, but just because you're over 50 doesn't mean you stop having sex."

Dr Sarah also adds that different age groups are more likely to contract different STIs.

"Different age groups won't necessarily mix sexually - chlamydia is seen in the younger populations, while there's a slight bias of syphilis appearing in older people. Anyone can catch any infection, but we generally don't see syphilis with the younger generation."

To help keep the numbers of cases low here, Dr Sarah says using protection, and regular screening are both key.

"You only have to have sex once in order to catch something. There's that assumption that STIs are diseases of younger people, but anybody who has sex could have an infection. There's a stigma of coming to the clinic which is probably still more held

by the older population - but we need to try and dispel that."

For anyone worried about sexual health screening - regardless of age - it could not be easier, says Dr Sarah.

"You can order a kit online, which may include a swab, fingerprint, or urine test. And one thing I love about my job is that there is little I can't do something about. Things are fixable - but it's so much better to pick them up early."

For more information on sexual health screenings, resources and advice in Suffolk, visit www.icash.nhs.uk/where-to-go/icash-suffolk.

Suffolk's sexual health clinics - where you can get help and advice:
Abbey View Clinic, 9/10 Churchyard, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 1RX; Haverhill Leisure Centre, Ehringshausen Way, Haverhill, CB9 0ER; Orwell Clinic, Lindbergh Road, Ipswich, IP3 9FA; Regent Road Clinic, 6 Regent Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1PA.



STI testing is key in helping to keep infection rates low

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