Factors shaping STI risk perceptions and practices following midlife relationship breakdown: A socioecological perspective



MRC/CSO Social and Public Health Sciences Unit





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INTRODUCTION

- Sexually transmitted infections
 (STIs) are increasing among those
 over 40, but little is known about
 the social context of STI
 transmission among people
 experiencing relationship transition
 during midlife.
- We sought to identify factors shaping STI risk perceptions and practices among midlife individuals following the end of a long-term relationship.

METHODS

- Design: In-depth interviews with respondents to the third British National Survey of Sexual Attitudes & Lifestyles (Natsal-3).
- Participants: 10 women and 9 men aged 40-59 who reported the end of a marital/cohabiting relationship with an other-sex partner in the past 5 years.
- Analysis: Thematic analysis (TA),
 with themes then organised using
 a modified socioecological
 framework.

ANALYSIS

 Participants' accounts indicate barriers to, and resources for, STI prevention after midlife relationship transition which accumulate across layers of social context – at the individual level, with sexual partners, peers, communities, and within broader social structures (see Fig 1).

SOCIETAL/STRUCTURAL

- Disconnect from sensationalised media coverage of STIs among those aged 40+
- Sexual health campaigns and specialist services perceived as youth-focused
 Age-gender barriers to: discussions about sexual health in general practice; accessing
- condoms in commercial venues

PEERS & COMMUNITIES

- Post-relationship change in social support (e.g. greater isolation vs. greater integration) can increase or mitigate vulnerability to sexual risk
 Exposure to younger relatives' safer sex practices helps update knowledge and validate strategies (e.g. mutual STI testing in early stages of a new partnership).
- Reduced capacity to prioritise new relationships and sexual health in context of midlife responsibilities and stressors (e.g. work, caring roles)

SEXUAL PARTNER/S

- Legacy of mistrust within former relationship/s impacts: motivation for, and timing of, midlife STI testing; willingness to trust accuracy of sexual history information shared by new partner/s
- Gender-age dynamics in risk negotiation include: resistance to condoms due to association with youth, lack of familiarity, concerns about erectile dysfunction; weak norms shaping expectations of mutual STI testing
- Inadequate indicators used to assess new partners' STI status (e.g. demeanour, appearance, assumptions about sexual history)

INDIVIDUAL

- Self-perception as oriented to long-term relationships fosters
- sense of insulation from STI risk
 Fertility loss (e.g. due to menopause, sterilisation, vasectomy) reduces motivation to prioritise 'safer sex'

Fig 1: Socioecological model of factors shaping STI-related risk perceptions and practices after midlife relationship transition

IMPLICATIONS

- Findings suggest unmet need for sexual health promotion among midlife adults with new sexual partners.
- Preventing STIs among midlife adults may require age-sensitive campaigns and interventions designed to address multi-level constraints on the navigation of sexual safety with new sexual partners.
- Harnessing existing flows
 of sexual health
 information and health promoting influence
 within social
 relationships (e.g. with
 friends and younger
 relatives) may be
 promising avenues for
 intervention.