

Special Audio Report Transcript

Headline: San Francisco Bay Area Aims To Tackle STIs With No-Cost Home Tests for Young Women

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Text:

As part of a statewide effort to reduce the spread of sexually transmitted infections, a new pilot program is offering no-cost home STI tests to women in the San Francisco Bay Area. This is a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service of the California HealthCare Foundation. I'm Deirdre Kennedy.

The no-cost tests screen for the three most common STIs affecting women -- gonorrhea, chlamydia and trichomoniasis. The program is headed by Freya Spielberg, senior health scientist at RTI International and director of Research Mentorship at the Stanford Clinical Excellence Research Center. Working in collaboration with state and county health agencies, Spielberg said the goal is to try to reach women who might be too shy or embarrassed to get tested through their doctor or at a public STI clinic.

(Spielberg): "When given the choice, particularly around sensitive infections, when there's a simple test, most people would prefer to test themselves. I believe that when testing for STIs and HIV becomes as easy as pregnancy testing, we'll see a dramatic drop in infection rates, and that's really the goal."

Unlike commercially available home test kits, the program includes treatment and counseling. Women between the ages of 18 and 30 can sign up on the "I Want A Kit" website and get a test sent to them. They mail their samples in a self-enclosed envelope to a lab at Johns Hopkins University and get their results by text message.

(Spielberg): "And if they're asymptomatic and they're positive for chlamydia, gonorrhea or 'tric,' they have the choice of pressing a button and having a prescription sent to a pharmacy of their choice locally."

Patients can pay for the medication with public or private health insurance, or get it from a low-cost STI clinic. County health workers will follow up with each woman who tests positive, to make sure she get proper treatment and gets re-tested within three months.

CDC recommends chlamydia screening for all women under age 25 who are sexually active. But studies estimate that only 38% of that population actually receives screening.

Heidi Bauer, chief of the California Department of Public Health's Sexually Transmitted Disease Control branch says most STIs have no symptoms, but if left untreated, can do irreversible damage.

(Bauer): "In particular, chlamydia and gonorrhea are associated with complications like pelvic inflammatory disease, which can lead to hospitalization, ectopic pregnancy -- which can also be very serious - - and in the long run, it can lead to infertility, and all of these infections increase the risk for HIV."

CDC estimates the nationwide cost of managing STIs -- including HIV -- is \$16.4 billion a year.

California's highest infection rates are among low-income African American and Latino communities in San Mateo, Contra Costa, Alameda and San Francisco counties.

Victoria Jones is an outreach worker with the San Francisco Department of Public Health who talks to youth groups in the county's lowest-income neighborhoods. She says a lot of young people still think they don't need to use condoms or get tested.

(Jones): "It's still that misconception that you can just look at somebody and tell that they have something. We'll hear this a lot through the youth. They'll say that if you put your finger in your ear and you get some ear wax and then you put it on the girl's vagina and she jumps, that means she has something. And they really believe that."

The pilot program doesn't target men directly, but health officials say getting partners treated is key to controlling the spread of STIs and preventing re-infections in women. Vivian Levy is STD control officer for San Mateo County.

(Levy): "We have something called 'partner delivered therapy,' which is basically, we will give an infected person enough treatment doses to treat his or her partners from the last two months."

San Mateo is also the first county to integrate the test results into the patients' electronic health records, if they provide consent.

The pilot program continues until it completes testing and treatment for 400 participants. So far more, than 220 women have enrolled.

This has been a special report for *California Healthline*, a daily news service from the California HealthCare Foundation. If you have feedback or other issues you'd like to have addressed, please email us at CHL@CHCF.org. I'm Deirdre Kennedy, thanks for listening.