

Task Force Issues Draft Recommendation Statement on Behavioral Counseling Interventions to Prevent Sexually Transmitted Infections

Task Force recommends behavioral counseling for all sexually active teens and for adults who are at increased risk for STIs

WASHINGTON, D.C. – December 17, 2019 – The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force (Task Force) today posted a draft recommendation statement on behavioral counseling interventions to prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Based on its review of the evidence, the Task Force found that clinicians can help prevent STIs by providing behavioral counseling to all sexually active adolescents and to adults who are at increased risk for STIs. **This is a B recommendation.**

Grade in this recommendation:

B: Recommended.

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STIs are common in the United States and can cause serious health problems. The most recent data estimate that approximately 20 million new cases of STIs occur each year, and about half of new STI cases are in people ages 15 to 24 years. Rates of several STIs, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis, continue to rise. If untreated, STIs can lead to serious complications, including a variety of diseases, infertility, and even death.

This draft recommendation applies to all sexually active teens and to adults who are at increased risk for STIs. To determine who should be offered behavioral counseling to prevent STIs, clinicians should ask their teen patients about whether they are sexually active and ask their adult patients about sexual behaviors and whether they have had an STI in the past year.

“Behavioral counseling interventions can help prevent STIs and increase safer sexual behaviors,” says Task Force vice chair Alex Krist, M.D., M.P.H. “These interventions generally provide basic information about STIs, assess individual risk, communicate about safer sex, and aim to increase commitment to safer sex practices.”

Effective behavioral counseling interventions can be offered in a variety of ways and settings. They can include individual or group in-person counseling, telephone support, written materials, videos, websites, email and text messages, or some combination of these.

“Clinicians can offer behavioral counseling to their patients directly during primary care visits, refer them to other providers, or connect them to media-based interventions, such as videos and websites,” says Task Force member Melissa Simon, M.D., M.P.H. “Through this recommendation, we hope more clinicians will consider various ways to offer behavioral counseling interventions to prevent STIs.”

The Task Force’s draft recommendation statement and draft evidence review have been posted for public comment on the Task Force website at www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org. Comments can be submitted from December 17, 2019, to January 21, 2020, at www.uspreventiveservicestaskforce.org/tfcomment.htm.

The Task Force is an independent, volunteer panel of national experts in prevention and evidence-based medicine that works to improve the health of all Americans by making evidence-based

recommendations about clinical preventive services such as screenings, counseling services, and preventive medications.

Dr. Simon is the George H. Gardner professor of clinical gynecology, the vice chair of clinical research in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and professor of preventive medicine and medical social sciences at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine. She is the founder and director of the Center for Health Equity Transformation and the Chicago Cancer Health Equity Collaborative and a member of the Robert H. Lurie Comprehensive Cancer Center.

Dr. Krist is a professor of family medicine and population health at Virginia Commonwealth University and an active clinician and teacher at the Fairfax Family Practice Residency. He is co-director of the Virginia Ambulatory Care Outcomes Research Network and director of community-engaged research at the Center for Clinical and Translational Research.

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