



Surge in Sexually Transmitted Diseases: Infection Prevention

Fulbright Specialist Program – Final Report

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In recent years, Iceland has experienced an increase in sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Chlamydia rates remain high but stable, and gonorrhea and syphilis cases have increased in recent years. These increases follow global trends, but remain concerning, as Iceland is home to approximately 400,000 people and faces unique challenges in managing public health.

At the Centre for Communicable Disease Control within the Directorate of Health, the team comprises ten professionals, including five doctors, one nurse, two data analysts, and an office manager. Across the Icelandic healthcare system, there are about 5 infectious disease doctors who review all STI cases along with all infectious diseases across the country.

Despite a limited number of STI experts, there is a strong commitment to strengthening the STI response across the country, with healthcare providers, community advocates, and policymakers invested in improving accessibility to STI prevention efforts. As part of this effort, the Chief Epidemiologist invited a Fulbright Specialist, Dr. Alison Footman, to provide external expertise to the Chief Epidemiologist on the high incidence of chlamydia and the rising incidence of gonorrhea and syphilis in Iceland.

As part of this effort, Dr. Footman collaborated with Dr. Anna Margrét Guðmundsdóttir in visiting and speaking with healthcare providers and community organizations across Iceland to better understand barriers in providing STI testing and identify ways to improve accessibility. Below are recommendations based on information received during these conversations.

Expand STI Education and Awareness Initiatives for Healthcare Providers and the Broader Community

Healthcare providers and community members both reported limited awareness about STIs across Iceland. This oftentimes led to stigmatizing views about sexual behaviors, who should or should not be tested, and, for some community members, limited their comfort with seeking STI testing.

Expanding STI education and awareness efforts for healthcare providers and community members could help to address stigma and normalize conversations about these infections and the importance of testing. Below are suggestions on improving STI education and awareness for both healthcare providers and community members:

- Develop easily shareable infographics on STIs, including annual rates in Iceland and their impact on health, to improve public understanding and awareness, which could be shared on social media and included in presentations.
- Develop adaptable STI education packages, including slides, infographics, and fact sheets, that can be easily tailored for use with different groups, like young people, and marginalized groups like people in prisons, people who inject drugs, sexual and gender minorities, and people living with HIV.
- Work with Heilsuvera to make STI information on the website more prominent, as many people find this platform to be a useful resource, and currently, it can be difficult to access information about STIs, including incidence rates.
- Integrate comprehensive sex education into school curricula to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to prevent STIs and promote sexual health.
- Strengthen collaboration with medical students (Ástráður) who are interested in providing sexual health education to young people (16–20-year-olds) to improve awareness about STIs.
- Promotion of the “where do I get tested for STD” page on the Directorate of Health website could help community members better understand where to get tested.
- Several partners of the Chief Epidemiologist have social media pages that could help to spread information about STIs, including [Heilsuvera](#) and [Samtökin '78](#).

Strengthen Collaboration among Healthcare Providers, Community Organizations, and the Chief Epidemiologist (Directorate of Health)

While meeting with healthcare providers and community organizations, many reported a desire for stronger collaboration to understand current efforts in improving STI testing accessibility. Ways collaboration could be strengthened are listed below.

- Host an annual or biannual meeting with healthcare providers, community organizations, and the Chief Epidemiologist to discuss pressing STI issues in Iceland.
- Have representatives from Landspítali and the Chief Epidemiologist meet with healthcare providers in different regions across Iceland to strengthen communication and collaboration.
- Schedule frequent meetings, monthly or quarterly, with Landspítali and the Chief Epidemiologist to discuss STI prevention, testing, and treatment programs, as Landspítali is one of the largest providers for STI testing in the country.
- Promote funding opportunities to community organizations that can expand STI testing and awareness initiatives. Regular reminders from the Chief Epidemiologist about these opportunities could highlight their importance and encourage members to prioritize them.

Strengthen Systems to Provide all Healthcare Providers with Current STI screening and Treatment guidelines, ensuring consistency with best evidence.

Some healthcare providers expressed confusion over STI testing guidelines that led to misunderstandings about when and whom to test, how testing will be paid for or reimbursed, how and when contact tracing should be conducted, and if treatment should be provided before or after patients provide a list of their recent sexual partners for contact tracing. This confusion can lead to delays in STI testing and treatment.

While other healthcare providers reported the guidelines as helpful and useful when building STI testing and treatment protocols, this gap in usage highlights the need for strengthened systems to ensure that all healthcare providers have access to current guidelines and can implement them in a way that promotes timely access to testing and treatment. Working with healthcare providers to update guidelines and provide training or condensed and easy-to-follow guides could help in reducing this confusion.

Strengthening access to the STI testing and screening guidelines could include:

- Ensuring guidelines are available in English.

- Ensure STI guideline tables are more prominent on the website and easier to find as quick resources to promote testing.
- Provide clarity around contact tracing, including when it should be completed and if or when treatment should be delayed while healthcare providers wait for the contact list.
- Add additional information about the importance of requesting reimbursement for STI testing so that healthcare providers understand their options for paying for tests.
- Increased collaboration between healthcare providers, for example, nurses and doctors, around guidelines could help ensure that primary care offices are consistent in the STI testing and treatment protocols.
- Providing STI education for healthcare providers can strengthen their understanding of the importance of testing and treatment guidelines, while also supporting the case to advocate for increased funding and reimbursement for STI services.

Enhance Access to STI Testing by Reducing Barriers and Increasing Availability of Services

The Icelandic STI testing services are incredibly strong, considering they offer patients self-collection kits which include vaginal, anal, oral swabs, and urine collection. Iceland is one of the few countries that routinely offer this service and could serve as an example for other countries in expanding self-collection programs.

There are a few opportunities to expand access for STI testing, including:

- Some community members reported discomfort when seeking STI testing services at Landspítali and primary healthcare clinics. These community members felt that if STI testing services were available at centers like Ylja and Samtökin '78, they would feel more comfortable seeking services, as these organizations were well-equipped to work with different marginalized groups. Additionally, community members expressed comfort in seeking STI testing services from the PrEP clinic, highlighting the importance of having these services at a variety of locations.
- The role of gynecologists in promoting STI testing was unclear and if, and then when, they provided testing. Strengthening relationships with gynecologists to better understand whether they provide STI testing and if patients would feel comfortable getting an STI test from these providers.
- STI testing is conducted in Primary Care centers, and sometimes the only place for people to get tested in the countryside. However, there is confusion on how much testing is done within these centers and if it is meeting patient needs. More understanding of the services offered in Primary Care is needed.

- Ensuring that STI testing is available and advertised for people without an Icelandic ID. For many, including healthcare providers and community members, there is confusion over where people without an Icelandic ID can seek testing services and how these services will be reimbursed. With the large tourist population and increasing immigration, it is imperative that people without an Icelandic ID number can access testing. Ensuring this information is available online and that healthcare providers know where to refer people to testing will help expand access among this population.
- As new public buildings, including prisons and hospitals, are built, it is important for the Chief Epidemiologist, along with other stakeholders, to be involved in the planning and design of buildings to ensure adequate space and systems are in place for STI testing, along with other health services.
- Expand STI testing hours by ensuring services are available at least once a week after 5 pm to improve accessibility beyond standard business hours.

Overall, STI testing in Iceland is incredibly strong. The country offers extragenital testing to all who seek services. This is unique as many countries do not offer extragenital testing and swabs to patients, especially at a country level. With a few modifications to expand STI testing services and improve awareness, Iceland could continue to serve as an example for how to offer testing services.

Results and lessons learned from increasing accessibility of STI testing and awareness in Iceland could be presented at future Conferences, including the STI & HIV World Congress, and the International Union Against STIs (IUSTI) World Congress ([2026 Prague](#)).
