

THE SIGMA PANEL: INSIGHT BLAST 4

Notifying former sex partners about STI diagnoses

Making It Count choice four concerns telling sexual partners about HIV/STI infections, both retrospectively (following diagnosis) or prospectively (preceding sex).

All STI/HIV infections are picked up from someone who already has the infection. When someone picks up an infection, they probably do so from someone who had not yet themselves had it diagnosed. If someone diagnosed with an infection has had more than one sex partner since their last STI screening, they may have passed their infection on to someone else. So former or recent sexual partners of people diagnosed with an STI are at high risk of having an undiagnosed infection. Sharing knowledge of STI/HIV diagnoses with former sexual partners alerts those partners to their high risk status and they can seek testing.

Social marketing can aim to create a social environment in which partner notification on diagnosis is regarded as the normal, right and easy thing to do by associating it with valued benefits, minimising its salient costs, and portraying it in terms desirable to the target audience.

Prevalence of partner notification

In Month 3 of the Sigma Panel, members were asked about their experience of partner notification and of its perceived costs and benefits.

Men were asked *Have you EVER been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection?* Overall, 61.3% said 'yes' (1057/1724). These men were asked *Have you ever contacted a sexual partner to let them know you have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection?* Of the men who had been diagnosed with an infection 71.6% (755/1055, missing 2) said they had done so (or 43.8% of all respondents).

Similarly, men were asked *Has any sexual partner of yours ever contacted you to let you know that they have been diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection?* Overall, 35.1% said they had been contacted. This is less than the 43.8% who said they had notified a partner.

Those who had contacted a partner to let them know of a diagnosis, and those who had been contacted, were asked when the last time these events had occurred. The following figure shows the proportion of all Panel members who had done so within increasing time periods.

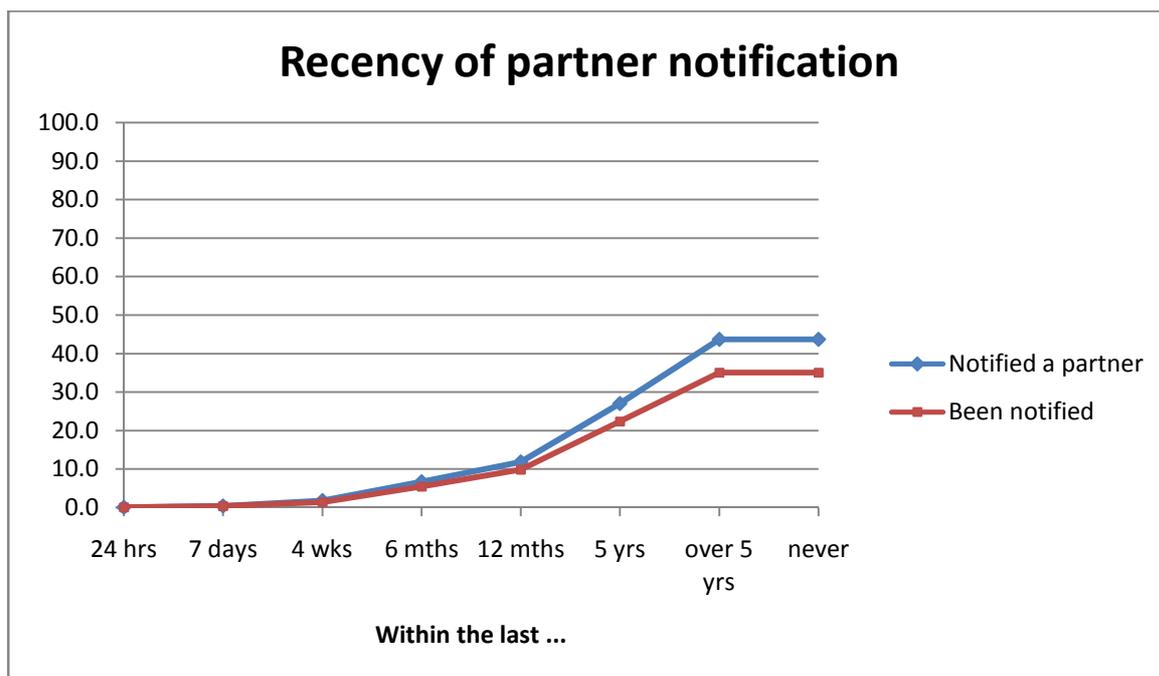


Figure 1: Length of time since notifying a sex partner of an STI diagnosis (cumulative proportions). [The Sigma Panel Month 3]

More men in the Sigma Panel had notified than had been notified. This may be a function of recall (men are more likely to remember notifying than being notified). It may also reflect disproportionate recruitment to the Panel of notifiers compared to non-notifiers.

The majority of men who had notified a partner had done so more than a year ago, but 12% of all respondents had done so within the last year.

INSIGHT: Partner notification is a common but infrequent experience for MSM.

Benefits of notifying a partner

All panel members were asked the open-ended question *From your perspective, what are the potential benefits (or advantages) of contacting a sexual partner to let them know you have been diagnosed with an STI?* (1599 men responded), and an identical question about 'the potential costs (or disadvantages)' of notifying a partner (1550 men responded).

The following table summarises the range of potential benefits and costs cited by Panel members:

Table 1: Benefits and costs of notifying former sex partners when diagnosed with a STI [The Sigma Panel Month 3]

	Notifying partners when diagnosed	NOT notifying partners when diagnosed
Benefits	<p>Feel good about doing the right thing. Eases conscience ('peace of mind'). It's the honourable thing to do. It's courteous and polite. It's responsible and mature. Shows respect for partners. Honesty promotes trust / friendship. Helps them. They can get tested. They get earlier treatment. They can inform their sex partners. Stops the spread ('nips it in the bud'). Stops it coming back to me. Normalises notification and reduces shame. Not being a wanker by doing nothing. Helps identify who the infection came from. Can give bad news to someone disliked.</p>	<p>It's easier to do nothing. Avoid partner judging or thinking badly of you. Avoid partner blaming or resenting you. Avoid shame, embarrassment, humiliation and awkwardness. Avoid aggravation. Avoid misunderstanding. Avoid upsetting or angering partner. Avoid partner telling others. Avoid partner taking revenge. Able to have sex with partner again. Regular partner remains unaware of other sexual partners (for the moment). Partner does not end relationship / friendship (yet). Partner remains ignorant that I know he's had sex with others (if presumed monogamy).</p>
Costs	<p>Difficult or boring hassle. Partner judges or thinks badly of you (dirty, slag). Partner blames or resents you. Shame, embarrassment, humiliation and awkwardness. Causes aggravation. Partner misunderstands reason for notification. Partner gets upset, angry or violent. Partner tells others (gossip). Partner takes revenge. Partner does not want to have sex with you again. Regular partner becomes aware of my other sexual partners. Partner ends relationship / friendship. Partner knows I know he's had sex with others (if presumed monogamy).</p>	<p>Feeling bad for not doing the right thing. Causes guilty feelings. It's dishonourable. It's rude. It's irresponsible and immature. Shows contempt for partners. They may find out you did not tell them and think badly of you (and tell others). Does not help them. They delay testing. They delay treatment. They cannot inform their sex partners. They pass it on to someone else. Makes it more likely I pick it up again. Maintains the shame of infections. Makes you a wanker. No information about who the infection came from. Missed opportunity to give bad news to someone disliked.</p>

Cited benefits of notification mainly revolved around 'doing the right thing' and the health benefits to partners.

Notification was often judged to be the right thing to do as men felt they would wish to be told if one of their partners had been diagnosed ('Do unto others...'). Notifying partners demonstrates many positive characteristics (honour, responsibility, maturity, honesty, etc.), making men feel good about themselves if they notify and also presenting a good impression to partners. The benefits clearly vary with the relationship to the partner being notified and the impression men want to convey to that partner.

The health benefits to partners occurred through raised awareness of the possibility of infection, and therefore increased likelihood of diagnosis and treatment. This benefit extended to the partner's partners through reducing the likelihood of infection being passed on, and several men mentioned the benefit thereby extending to themselves, either from having sex with the same partner again or by there generally being less infection in the community.

The costs of notifying partners also varied depending on the relationship to the partner. For example, there is a risk that a regular partner will end a relationship if told (although they may be even more likely to end a relationship if they later find out they have not been told).

There were no cited positive benefits to NOT notifying partners – simply the absence of the potential costs of not doing so.

INSIGHT: Representations of the many positive possible responses to notification should reduce associations men may make between notification and negative responses.

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