Herpes and the City: Rate of HSV2 Among New Yorkers Higher Than National Average

If only Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte talked as much about sexually transmitted infections as they do about sex, it would be a wonderful opportunity to educate the viewing audience. If these four popular characters of Sex and the City were to talk, odds are one subject would very likely come up—genital herpes. According to a new health-related survey conducted by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, about one in four adults in New York City are infected with genital HSV-2.

The survey reveals that the rate of genital herpes infection in New York City is slightly higher than the national average—nearly 28% compared to approximately 17% nationally. When the age range was restricted to a similar population range (20-49 years) of that used to derive the national figure, (14-49) New York City still had a higher seroprevalence at 26.1%.

The data come from the city’s Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NYC HANES), which is modeled after the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES). Such surveys utilize such methods as physical examinations, laboratory tests, and personal interviews to assess the health and nutritional status of a population and measure trends over time. As this was the first measure of the infection rate in NYC, there is no comparison data to indicate if the rate is rising or on the decline.

The NYC HANES revealed some groups were disproportionately affected. For example, HSV-2 infection rates were found to be higher among women than men (35.6% versus 19%), higher among blacks than whites (49% versus 14.1%), and higher among men who have sex with men than those who don’t (32% versus 18%).

Overall, individuals who reported having had sex, having had sex before 18 years of age, >10 lifetime sex partners, or having a recent diagnosis of chlamydia or gonorrhea were more likely to be infected with genital HSV-2. Additional, the vast majority (88.4%) of all those who tested posted for genital HSV-2 were previously undiagnosed.

While the data was only recently published, the survey was conducted from June to December in 2004 among a representative sample of New York City adults 20 or older. Of the 1,999 people enrolled in the survey, 1,784 were tested for HSV-2.

To learn more about NYC HANES, visit the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene website.