

This ‘morning-after pill’ can prevent sexually transmitted infections. Why aren’t more doctors prescribing it?

Years after it was first proven to work, a new tool for preventing sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is on the brink of entering mainstream medicine.

That tool is doxyPEP, an antibiotic that works like a morning-after pill — but instead of preventing pregnancy within hours of unprotected sex, it prevents STIs like chlamydia and syphilis.

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[Sexually transmitted infections have been rising](#) in recent years, with [syphilis](#) in particular spreading explosively, and doxyPEP could help turn back the tide. Rising STI rates are costing dollars and lives: The CDC estimates that the US spent [\\$1.1 billion](#) on bacterial STIs in 2018, and 166 infants [died](#) in 2021 as a consequence of a [syphilis epidemic](#) affecting women of childbearing age.

And while San Francisco is ready to roll out doxyPEP more broadly, public health agencies like the CDC haven’t yet issued full-throated recommendations in support of the pill’s use. What’s the holdup?

The major obstacle is the fear that doing so will touch off a perilous game of infectious disease whack-a-mole — that in trying to mitigate one public health crisis, we’ll worsen another one.

Doxycycline, the medication in doxyPEP, is an antibiotic. Worldwide antibiotic [resistance is a major problem](#) — and doxyPEP runs the hypothetical risk of exacerbating it. Disease-causing bacteria can evolve resistance when exposed to certain antibiotics, becoming more dangerous.

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