

HIV-Negative Gay Men's Understandings of Sexual Safety without Condoms



CIHR Team in the Study of Acute HIV Infection in Gay Men
Early Recognition and Rapid Response to HIV Status

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What is the study about?

We set out to learn what HIV-negative gay men understood about sexual safety and their experiences of having anal sex without condoms. Participants were asked to talk about their everyday social and sexual lives, including the kinds of sex they have, their understanding of risk, the different HIV prevention strategies they use, their experiences with HIV testing, and sources of social support.

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“Eventually [we] decided to go get tested together. And get results. And after that, stop using condoms. And, yeah. We had certain rules. Like, where it would be okay to mess around with others. And it would be safe with other people”.

– One participant described establishing “rules” with his boyfriend to make sure their condomless sex within the relationship remained safe

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How was the study done?

We recruited 166 participants at a community gay men's sexual health clinic in Vancouver, BC between June 2011 and January 2012. The men entering the study had recently received a negative HIV test result, and they were asked to complete questionnaires over the course of a year.

A sample of 33 men who reported recently having anal sex without condoms took part in two in-depth interviews, using questions that were developed through discussions with our community partner, Health Initiative for Men. In this paper, we focused on men's descriptions of the situations and relationships where they have used strategies for HIV prevention with anal sex that do not always involve using condoms.

What did the study find?

We found that these men overwhelmingly talked about their desire to remain HIV-negative, and described using both condom and non-condom based strategies to reduce their risk of HIV infection during anal sex. Participants talked about a wide range of situations that influenced the decisions that they made during sex, including how well they knew their sexual partners, their use of substances, and their desires for sexual pleasure and intimacy.

Many men described their recent episodes of anal sex without condoms as “low risk” or “mostly safe” based on their knowledge of a partner's HIV-negative status. Some men explained that while using other strategies for HIV prevention (that didn't involve condoms) may not have reduced “all risks” related to HIV transmission, they did provide varying degrees of safety as well as allowed for greater sexual intimacy, spontaneity and pleasure.

When talking about relationships with their primary partners such as boyfriends, husbands, or regular casual partners, anal sex without condoms was almost always described as safe, often happened after talking to their partners about it, and sometimes led to decisions to test for HIV together. Participants discussed establishing “rules” in their relationships to maintain sexual safety. For example, one man explained: ***“Eventually [we] decided to go get tested together. And get results. And after that, stop using condoms. And, yeah. We had certain rules. Like, where it would be okay to mess around with others. And it would be safe with other people”.***

Men explained that the anal sex without condoms they had in casual relationships or with hookups often happened with little discussion about HIV status. For some men the discussion was avoided altogether and understanding of HIV status was based on assumptions or guesses. One participant explained the “trust” he had in his sexual partner: **“...he always says he’s negative, so I trust him. And on the [online] profile, he also says he’s negative”.**

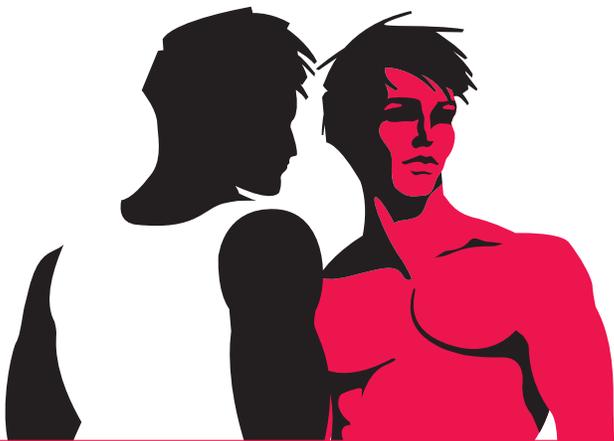
Those participants who said that they knowingly had sex with HIV-positive partners talked about using a range of strategies, either alone or in combination, including taking the insertive position in sex (being the top, which has a lower risk of becoming infected with HIV than being the bottom), using condoms, or considering the man’s viral load and whether he was on HIV treatment or not (as lower viral load may mean less chance of transmission of the virus). For example, one man explained: **“We didn’t always have safer sex because there is less risk with someone topping someone without a condom”.**

Several participants also talked about not having very much “solid information” regarding how HIV viral load affects the risk of passing on HIV during sex, and said that current public health information on this topic is not clear.

Why is the study important?

The experiences described by the men in our study show that participants have nuanced understandings of sexual safety depending on the situations they find themselves in. Many men did not consider sex without condoms to always be risky, and they provided insights into the situations and relationships in which HIV prevention strategies that don’t involve condoms are currently being used. These strategies have been largely developed by and taken up by gay men themselves.

However, our research shows there is more to sexual safety than understanding the risk of HIV transmission in sexual situations. For example, poor communication between sexual partners may be a potent source of risk. We believe this research illustrates the importance of resources to help support gay men’s sexual decision making, including improved sexual health messaging, increased HIV testing availability and more accessible counselling services.



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