

I READ THE NEWS TODAY, OH BOY!

What can we do about the increase in HIV notifications?

Queensland figures for HIV in 2002 increased by 20% and the annual number of diagnoses has plateaued at this higher level. Since 1998, more gay men are reporting that they sometimes engage in unprotected anal intercourse. There has been an increase in the number of men infected with gonorrhoea (a sexually transmitted infection which can facilitate the transmission of HIV). And there are fears among some epidemiologists, medical practitioners, researchers and gay men that we are seeing the beginning of “second wave” in the HIV epidemic. Are we? We do not know.

Condoms?

We know that most of us - gay men - are using condoms when having anal intercourse most of the time. Of the 1510 men who said that they had sex in a casual encounter in the 2003 Brisbane Gay Community Periodic Survey, 69.8% report that in casual encounters in the last six months they either didn't engage in anal sex or, when they did, they used a condom. 30.2% of men surveyed reported that they sometimes did not use condoms when having sex with casual partners in the previous six months. When these figures were originally released some time ago, mainstream media was keen to portray gay men as being irresponsible and reckless. Meanwhile, some gay men bemoan that the safe sex message is losing its salience and that HIV is no longer relevant in our lives. What we hear from other gay men, however, is that most of us are practising safe sex most of the time. And even though in our work, home and social lives some of us might not think about HIV, much less talk about it, safe sex and HIV remains a very significant part of our sexual lives.

Safe sex & HIV

There is no denying that some of us fuck without condoms on the odd occasion. Perhaps we want to express and experience deep intimacy with someone, or we're just feeling really horny and getting into the heat of the moment. Maybe we trust that our sexual partners will take responsibility for condom use if it were needed. Or it could be as simple as not liking the feel of using a condom and thinking that “just this once” it will be okay. Whatever the reason – and there are many more than offered here – these instances of fucking without condoms remain occasional.

Personal strategies- strategic positioning

Even when we fuck without condoms many of us still take precautions to reduce the risk of catching or passing on HIV. In the 2003 Brisbane Gay Community Periodic Survey, a majority of men who said that they sometimes didn't use condoms with casual partners also said that they always withdrew before they ejaculated. We also know, from research and from what other gay men tell us, that some of us use assumptions we make about the HIV status of our partners to decide whether it is likely that fucking without condoms is safe. We may assume that they have the same HIV status as us and that, therefore, it is safe to fuck without condoms, based on where we may be, how we may have met our partner, and on whether or not he insists on using condoms. All of this suggests that we are negotiating our way through a landscape where HIV and its prevention retain a significant place. However, the HIV figures show that some of the strategies that we may use do not work all of the time.

Pulling out before cumming is not a 100% guarantee.

Our sexual partners may not necessarily be the same HIV status as us.

Test results from three years ago that show our HIV status as negative may not necessarily be valid today.

Complacency

It is important to be wary of complacency. But to point the finger and say that gay men are irresponsible and wilfully reckless is to deny the successes that we have had in maintaining a safe sex culture. We have been doing well for the last 20 years of this epidemic, and we continue to do so despite the fact that we are facing new challenges. HIV treatments do not provide the solutions that we once hoped for. Some of us who are living with HIV are required to adhere to strict treatment regimes that can be difficult to maintain. Vomiting, severe headaches and diarrhoea are common side effects. It is not unusual for some of us to negotiate with our doctors to take a break from HIV treatments because of the severity of these side effects.

Living with HIV

For those of us who are doing well on treatments, body image and meeting our social, emotional and sexual needs are just some of the challenges which we negotiate in pursuing meaningful and fulfilling lives as gay men with HIV. And doing all this, we feel our way, through an environment where we do not even know when and how to begin talking about living with HIV. Perhaps those of us, whether HIV negative or HIV positive, who experienced the early crisis years may have an understanding of the issues. But at the same time, those were difficult years and we may not wish to talk or to think about it anymore. And there are also those of us who are HIV negative for whom the virus has always formed a part of our landscape, and so talking about HIV and talking about safe sex just doesn't make sense. Or it may be that we've grown up in a world where HIV and AIDS have always been around and talking about it as if it's a crisis doesn't make sense. Within this environment, how do we even begin to negotiate safe sex? Caught up in the anxieties of whether he will be THE ONE, how comfortable are we to talk with our prospective partners about fucking with condoms? When being able to score that sexual encounter with that really cute guy is tied up with how we feel about ourselves, how do we insist that "if it's not on, it's not on"? Most of us are just doing it - fucking with condoms and water-based lubricant. Some of the time, for different reasons, we don't. But we don't ever talk about it. We don't ever raise the issue. We use different strategies to reduce the risk and in silence hope that our luck still holds. Part of the reason for this is historical. After twenty years of AIDS and nearly as many in HIV prevention education, assumptions abound in relation to what we know, what we don't, what and who we are now prepared to listen to. In some ways the debate has become more complex, withdrawal and strategic positioning* are but two more elements to add into the mix when considering sexual health and safety. Are we seeing the beginning of a 'second wave'? It is difficult to tell. But it is not too late to prevent it._

**Withdrawal refers to the practice of pulling out before cumming when having unprotected anal intercourse with a partner of any serostatus. Strategic positioning refers to the practice of HIV positive men being the receptive partner during unprotected anal intercourse. Neither practice has proven effective in stopping the transmission of the virus.*

Adapted from work by David V Voon - Lifeblood - Victorian AIDS Council