

Generational Differences in Sexual Behaviour and Partnering Among Gay, Bisexual and Other Men who have Sex with Men

Do the social and cultural conditions experienced by different generations of men who have sex with men affect their sexual behaviours and partnering?

What is the importance of this study?

- Studies have proposed that the events and cultural shifts experienced during an individual's life can impact one's behaviour and development, including their sexual behaviour.
- Recent changes in Canada—such as the Pride Movement, legalization of same-sex marriage and HIV treatment advancements—have substantially changed the environment for gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM).
- Older gbMSM experienced paradigm-shifting events, such as the 1969 legalization of homosexuality in Canada and the Stonewall riots. Some may have also lost loved ones and community during the peak of North America's HIV/AIDS epidemic.
- Changing social conditions have caused three distinct generations of gbMSM to emerge: baby boomers (born before 1962), Generation-Xers (born between 1962 and 1968) and millennials (born before or in 1987).
- This study set out to identify cross-generational differences in perspectives and practices in relation to sex. Understanding the viewpoints of each generation can improve health care education and HIV prevention campaigns.

FACT BOX

While there was notable similarity in sexual activity across generations, millennial gbMSM reported earlier age at first anal intercourse and less high-risk sex. All generations trended towards less high-risk sex, fewer partners and regular partnering over time.

What are the key study findings?

- Despite common assumptions that distinct generational cultural and social environments would lead to differences across generations, most sexual behaviours (i.e., receiving oral sex, rimming, fisting, watersports, group sex) and rates of sexual activity were similar.
- On average within a six-month period, study participants of all three generations had similar partner statuses and number of sexual partners.
- Some sexual behaviours differed across generations; for example, baby boomers had lower rates of masturbation and receiving money for sex work, and levels of receptive anal sex decreased from younger to older gbMSM.
- Millennials reported earlier age at first anal intercourse (18, versus 19 or 20), using smartphone apps more often to seek sex and—against stereotype or assumption—less high-risk sex than other generations.
- Over the study period, all generations trended towards less high-risk sex behaviour, having fewer sexual partners and more regular partnering.



What do these findings mean?

- Three generations of gbMSM exhibited considerable similarities in sexual behaviour, showing that older gbMSM are an active part of the gbMSM sexual community. Therefore, HIV prevention efforts should be inclusive of all gbMSM, regardless of age or generation.
- Differences in sexual activity between the generations can likely be explained by the combined effects of aging and the changing cultural perceptions regarding sexual behaviours over time.
- A trend in all generations toward safer sex and partnering occurred in spite of, or perhaps because of, changes in culture and technology alongside advances in HIV prevention techniques.

How was this study conducted?

- Sexually-active gbMSM in the Momentum Health Study completed study visits every six months between February 2012 and February 2017, where they were asked about their demographic information, sexual behaviours, drug use and social perspectives using a computer-based survey.
- The study examined six-month trends in sexual behaviours, including number of male sex partners, high-risk sex (defined as condomless anal sex with a partner of unknown or opposite HIV status), and relationship status (being single versus having a regular partner).

What is the BC-CfE Momentum Health Study?

Evidence from British Columbia and elsewhere has demonstrated the expansion of access to antiretroviral HIV treatment (ART) can result in population-level reductions in HIV incidence. This is the concept behind the made-in-BC Treatment as Prevention[®] strategy, or TasP[®], which aims to expand early HIV testing and treatment to improve patients' health and curb the spread of HIV. Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) represent the most affected HIV risk group, both in BC and Canada. The BC-CfE Momentum Health Study is designed to measure changes in HIV risk behaviour, attitudes toward TasP[®] and the proportion of HIV-positive gbMSM with unsuppressed viral load over time in the Vancouver region. The study uses respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to obtain a more representative sample reflecting the diversity of the gbMSM population in Vancouver.

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