

“Condoms are...like public transit. It’s something you want everyone else to take.”

Perceptions and use of condoms among HIV negative gay men in Vancouver, Canada, in the era of biomedical and sero-adaptive prevention

What is the importance of this study?

- In British Columbia, despite an overall decline, HIV diagnoses among gay men have remained consistent, with increases in diagnoses among young gay men.
- Once considered synonymous with HIV prevention, condom use is on the decline and the frequency of condomless anal intercourse (CAI) and number of CAI partners over time are increasing.
- Factors such as emotional or erotic connection and peer pressure have been linked to CAI or “barebacking” because, for some men, condoms are seen as a barrier to intimacy.
- Growing awareness and increased access to biomedical interventions such as highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART), and prevention strategies like Treatment as Prevention® (TasP®), post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) and pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in BC has led to a growing sense of “optimism” as HIV is now considered a more manageable chronic condition.
- The purpose of this study was to qualitatively explore motivations for condom use and lack of use in a HAART-based intervention landscape. In BC, all individuals diagnosed with HIV are immediately offered access to antiretroviral treatment under the TasP® strategy.
- On consistent and sustained HIV antiretroviral treatment, a person living with HIV can achieve an undetectable viral load at which point they cannot transmit the virus to others. This is the concept supporting TasP®.

FACT BOX

A large proportion of HIV transmissions (as much as 68%) occur within the context of primary relationships.

How was this study conducted?

- Participants in the Momentum Health Study completed a computer-based questionnaire about their use of HIV prevention strategies. Participants were eligible for the qualitative study if they were HIV-negative and reported prior use of PEP, PrEP and/or viral load sorting.
- 19 individuals took part in semi-structured interviews with questions focused on their perceptions and use of HIV prevention strategies, and how this use affected their conceptions of sexual “risk” and “safety” (particularly regarding condom use).
- Interviews were recorded and coded in order to pull out major themes.

What are the key study findings?

- Participants’ perceptions and use of condoms were found to be affected by individual, interpersonal, community and policy factors. Factors associated with CAI included the desire for intimacy and pleasure, condom fatigue, normalization of barebacking in the gay community, feeling unable to negotiate condom use with partners and lack of self-control due to substance use or the “heat of the moment.”



- CAI was also linked to the belief that TasP[®] and PrEP were effective alternatives to condoms. While TasP[®] and PrEP use seemed to result in risk compensation, participants who had used PEP reported a “wake-up call” effect that resulted in commitment to consistent condom use.
- When not using condoms, participants employed various other HIV status-based strategies to mitigate risk. These included negotiated safety agreements, only having sex with people of a specific sero-status or undetectable status, or being the top in riskier situations.

What do these findings mean?

- While gay men may still be concerned about HIV transmission, the expansion of prevention options has broadened the concept of sexual “safety” beyond condom use.
- HIV intervention work should strive to advance combination prevention, where condoms and other behavioural interventions are promoted along with biomedical and sero-adaptive advancements.
- Interventions aimed at encouraging strategic, as opposed to consistent, condom use may be more successful as they would provide gay men with multiple prevention strategies while leaving space for sexual agency.

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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