

## **NAVIGATING COVID-19 RISK IN SEXUAL CONTEXTS AMONG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN IN AUSTRALIA**

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**Background:** In response to COVID-19 restrictions, Australian gay and bisexual men (GBM) dramatically reduced or stopped sex, particularly with casual partners and fuckbuddies. We investigated how GBM who continued or restarted sex while restrictions were still in place viewed and managed COVID-19 risk in sexual contexts.

**Methods:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted between August and November 2020 with 26 GBM. Interviews explored sexual behaviour from the beginning of pandemic restrictions in Australia (mid-March 2020) to the time of the interview. This included COVID-19 risk reduction practices used during sexual encounters.

**Results:** Seventeen interview participants had engaged in sexual activity outside of their household during COVID-19 restrictions or as they eased at the time of their interview. The sexual partners of these men included boyfriends, fuckbuddies, and casual partners. Participants' decisions to engage in sex was usually based on a prior familiarity with their sexual partner (boyfriend and/or fuckbuddy), or local COVID-19 epidemiology. All men were aware of the risk of COVID-19 during sex and generally perceived their risk as low. Men described three types of COVID-19 risk-reduction strategies: hygiene (e.g., washing hands, showering); physical (e.g., avoiding kissing, looking for sickness, using alternate premises); and conversational (e.g., obtaining social and/or sexual history). Some men acknowledged the likely ineffectiveness of these COVID-19 risk reduction strategies. However, sometimes these strategies were employed to create a sense of reassurance that practical steps had been taken to avoid COVID-19 transmission rather than based on the strategies' effectiveness.

**Conclusion:** Australian GBM are aware of the risk that sex poses for COVID-19 transmission. Men who engaged in sex during or with easing restrictions nonetheless perceived their risk of COVID-19 as low. Although some men employed some form of COVID-19 risk reduction during sexual encounters, a reduction in risk may not always be their primary aim when negotiating these encounters.

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