

How has pre-exposure prophylaxis uptake changed gay and bisexual men's negotiations of condom use and HIV risk with casual sexual partners?

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Introduction

Condomless sex has increased alongside scale-up of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) among gay and bisexual men (GBM) in Australia.

Discussing HIV prevention with casual sexual partners has traditionally been acknowledged as a risk reduction strategy.

Little is known about how discussions with casual partners have changed since PrEP implementation.

Aim

To explore the choices PrEP-experienced GBM make about negotiating HIV prevention during casual sex, both when on PrEP and when taking time off PrEP.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 PrEP-experienced GBM between July 2020 and February 2021.

Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Sample (n=40)

Ages ranged from 23 to 71 years with a median age of 39.

Most (n=37) identified as gay.

Most (n=32) reported their cultural/ethnic background as White European, one South Asian, two Southeast Asian, and five Northeast Asian.

All but two had access to Medicare.

The sample was highly educated, with 24 having university education.

Conclusion

Decreases in explicit negotiations between casual sexual partners have occurred in parallel to widespread PrEP uptake.

Due to decreased condom use and reduced negotiations, non-users of PrEP may experience greater challenges than PrEP users when assessing and negotiating HIV-risk with casual partners. Yet, non-users may need to have these discussions to increase their HIV prevention safety.

Non-users may require updated health promotion that provides guidance on when discussion is appropriate, how to approach it, and how it works as an HIV prevention technique.

While there appears to be some evidence that PrEP users may reject partners who prefer condoms, in this sample this was rare; most participants were instead flexible with partners' preferences.

Results

Reduced condom use after initiating PrEP

Most participants reported significant decreases in condom use after initiating PrEP, as well as increased sexual liberation and reduced HIV anxiety.

Before PrEP I would wear a condom and it would be incredibly rare for me to not use one. Pretty much after I went onto PrEP that use dropped significantly and basically straight away. But it's made sex so much better. (32 years)

New assumptions about condomless sex

Most participants explained that prior to initiating PrEP, they assumed condoms would be used during sex and that not using condoms required discussion, but since initiating PrEP not using condoms had become assumed and condom use now required discussion.

It's really more around the whole dialogue of condoms doesn't really come into it anymore. If somebody is really adamant about condoms, they'll say so, but otherwise I won't really raise condoms (55 years)

Flexibility about others' condom preferences

While a few participants described rejecting partners who requested condoms, most participants were flexible with a sexual partner's preference.

I was like, "You wanna fuck me without a condom, that's fine. If you wanna fuck me with a condom, that's fine too." So I was very flexible. I know some guys were particularly anxious about it and so I was happy to go with that, even though I did prefer it without (54 years)

Reduced explicit discussion about HIV prevention

Alongside reducing condom use, explicitly discussing HIV prevention had become less important; participants reasoned that discussion was not required because they were already HIV-protected on PrEP. Participants also reported that they only engaged in discussion about HIV prevention if their sex partner initiated it. Often, indicating PrEP use on dating profiles was perceived as sufficient implied communication.

Over time, now the indicators for HIV prevention are built into peoples' profiles, so you don't even have to ask. Before I guess you'd sporadically have that conversation. But it's like waned off over time because of apps and purely because of me being like I can fix the STI when I get my tests and I'm already safe from HIV, so why bother (25 years)

Discussions during periods off PrEP

Twelve participants had condomless sex with fuckbuddy or casual partners during periods not taking PrEP. During these events, condoms were not considered a favourable choice as participants still preferred condomless sex despite not using PrEP at the time.

Some of these 12 relied on trust and familiarity with fuckbuddy partners to practice condomless sex and reasoned that they knew these partners well enough to know they were on PrEP, HIV negative, or had undetectable viral load.

My sex life was very unpredictable. If I did have sex, it would always be with someone I knew well. In my mind, I was like, "Well, the safest thing to do would be ideally go back on PrEP myself but, if I can't do that, I can pick guys I talk to a lot that I know are on PrEP or are undetectable, and basically just knock everyone else out of consideration (25 years)

However, some of these 12 made assumptions about casual partners' PrEP or HIV status without discussing it.

I did go for a weekend in [city] to see friends and did have sex without being on PrEP but then the assumption was everybody else was. So in my eyes it wasn't that big a risk (55 years)