

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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Background:

Condomless sex has increased alongside scale-up of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) among gay and bisexual men (GBM) in Australia. Little is known about how discussions with casual partners have changed. We explored the choices PrEP-experienced GBM make about negotiating HIV prevention during casual sex.

Methods:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 PrEP-experienced GBM between July 2020 and February 2021. Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results:

Ages ranged from 23 to 71 years (median=39 years). Most (n=37) identified as gay and 24 had university education. Most participants reported significant decreases in condom use after initiating PrEP. Participants explained that prior to initiating PrEP, they assumed condoms would be used during sex and that not using condoms required discussion, but since PrEP initiation not using condoms had become assumed and condom use now required discussion. While a few participants described rejecting partners who requested condoms, most participants were flexible with a sexual partner's preference. 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. Often, indicating PrEP use on dating profiles was perceived as sufficient implied communication. Participants also reported that they only engaged in discussion about HIV prevention if their sex partner initiated it. Twelve participants had condomless sex during periods not taking PrEP. During these events, some of these 12 made assumptions about casual partners' PrEP or HIV status without discussing it.

Conclusion:

Decreases in explicit negotiations between sexual partners have occurred in parallel to widespread PrEP uptake. Non-users of PrEP may experience greater challenges than PrEP users when assessing and negotiating HIV-risk with casual partners. 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.

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