

Gay Men's Health Fact Sheet Series

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A defining part of gay identity is sexual orientation. Gay men's sexuality is an important part of their lives. When expressing sexuality, whether you are young or old, it is important to have a sense of self-esteem that builds comfort and confidence.

Every individual has their own unique expression of sexuality. Engaging in sexual activity can be exciting or stressful. Good communication between partner(s) before, during and after sexual activity is the key to an enjoyable experience. Gay men need to feel free to tell their partners what they like and dislike as well as being willing to accept the personal choices of others. Maintaining health and safety is the key.

It isn't only about anal penetration. 'Men with men' sex includes many different activities from mutual masturbation, oral sex and massage to role-playing, S&M (sadism & masochism) and B&D (bondage and domination). There exists a wide range of sexual activities. Practising safer sex leads to better health and reduces the risk of catching disease.

Tips to help make sex safer.

- Talk about sex. Then talk about it some more. Talk with sexual partners, friends, family, community volunteers, doctors, nurses and counsellors. There is a lot say when

discussing sexual health. The more it is talked about it, the greater the awareness and more informed are the choices one makes.

- Keep talking - before, during, and after sex. It is important to agree upon and respect personal boundaries around sexual play.
- Talk about sexual history.
- Talk about condom use.
- The use of lubricants helps to reduce friction and prevent tearing of body tissue. Using lubricants can supplement the lubrication the body generates naturally and add more protection. Use lubricants that are water-based or silicone-based. Lubricants that are petroleum or oil-based (like Vaseline petroleum jelly or hand lotion) can feel slicker, but cannot be used with latex condoms - they make them break!
- Bodily fluids (like blood and semen) can carry viruses or other diseases. Using latex condoms, dental dams or plastic food wrap during oral, anal/oral and anal sex creates an effective barrier that can reduce disease transmission. Polyurethane condoms are also effective and are extremely strong. Using a new condom for each activity can reduce transmission of disease.

“Anyone who is sexually active can potentially catch a sexually transmitted infection.”

- Not comfortable with condoms? Practise makes perfect! Try masturbating alone or with a partner, and experiment with putting on and taking off the condom. Try different brands, sizes and shapes of condoms, and don't forget the lubricant.
- Avoid lubricants and condoms with the spermicide Nonoxynol-9 (N-9). It can disturb the body's natural mucosal lining in the mouth and anus, actually increasing risk of infection by disease.
- Anyone who is sexually active can potentially catch a sexually transmitted infection (STI). STIs are usually transmitted during unprotected sex, including oral sex, by an infected partner. Some STIs can be transmitted without showing any symptoms. All sexually active men should be tested regularly. If there is a possibility of an STI seek medical help and treatment immediately.

While sex may be pleasurable, there are also known risks. If sexually active, it is important to consider your level of acceptable risk. How do you feel with taking greater risks? What is your ability to accept the consequences of your actions? Questions like these can help in negotiating sexual encounters. Different people have different levels of tolerance for risk-taking. Some accept more risk and others accept less.

“Not comfortable with condoms? Practise makes perfect.”

Penile Health

The penis is the main sex organ for men. Many men find pleasure in having their penis rubbed, touched, massaged, sucked and licked. The tip of the penis is covered by highly sensitive skin cells and is called the “glans.” When boys are born, the glans is covered by a layer of thicker skin called the foreskin. Some cultures promote cutting of the foreskin (circumcision).

One of the reasons circumcision is done is to prevent infections although research shows that by cleaning under the foreskin the risk of infection is decreased.

The shaft of the penis holds the urethra and many blood vessels. These vessels fill with blood when a man is sexually aroused, causing the penis to become stiff and hard. Usually, the penis stays hard until the man loses sexual interest. The opening for the urethra is found at the very tip of the penis. It

is the opening through which urine and ejaculate (semen and sperm, or cum) leaves the body.

If the penis is swollen, painful to touch, shows red blotches or dots on the penis shaft, or when urinating discharges white or yellowish pus or fluid (not due to ejaculation), these might be the signs of infection or injury. The symptoms may be related to a STI, a urinary tract infection, an irritation, allergic reaction, or damaged blood vessels. If the shaft is swollen, uncircumcised men may find it painful to pull back the foreskin. These symptoms should be brought to the attention of a doctor or a nurse immediately.

Testicular Health

The testicles produce sperm and male hormones. They hang loosely beneath the shaft of the penis in the scrotum. Fluids sometimes collect in the scrotum or in the testicles creating a lump or cyst which may go away on its own, or may require minor surgery. Other lumps or swelling may be the first symptoms of testicular cancer or cancer of the scrotum. Doctors recommend that males 15 years and older examine their testicles for lumps monthly. Testicular cancer is treatable and curable with early detection.

Anal Health

Many men experience sexual pleasure when playing with the anus. This is not surprising considering the large number of sensitive nerve endings located in the anal area. Massage of the prostate gland is also possible during anal play. Anal play can include stimulation of the anus using the penis, fingers, hands (fisting), sex toys, or mouth.

To reduce the risk of injury or infection, it is especially important to use a water-based lubricant (lube) during anal penetration. Skin tears in the anus may occur when the anus is not lubricated. Removing rings and clipping fingernails as well as using barriers such as latex condoms, gloves and dental dams can prevent transmission of viruses and bacteria. Lubricants with the spermicide Nonoxynol-9 (N-9) are not recommended as they can actually cause open sores or skin tears therefore increasing the risk of infection by STIs. Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can be passed on through feces (shit), so keep it away from the eyes, mouth and open sores.

Washing the anus before sexual activity is a good idea, however overuse of douches or enemas can disturb the natural bacterial protection of the anus and cause other health problems. It is better not to use douches, but if used do so with caution. Talk with partners about how to reduce risks before engaging in sexual activity.

Anal cancer is a concern for gay men who have anal sex. About twice as many HIV-positive men than uninfected men develop anal cancer, putting them at particular risk. The major risk factor for anal cancer is infection with the Human Papilloma Virus (HPV). This virus causes genital warts and polyps (or growths), in and around the anus. Infection with HPV is for life, and the infected person can pass the virus on to others. Many people with early HPV infection and/or early anal can-

cer have no visible symptoms. HPV is detected through examination of the anus, or by the presence of blood in feces (shit). Anal Pap smears are tests used to detect changes in anal tissues that might indicate a risk of developing anal cancer. Some physicians recommend that males with a history of anal sex should be screened for HPV and anal cancer. Routine screening can be performed by a doctor as part of a regular medical check-up.

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