

HIV and gay men - safe sex

In Australia, the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is most commonly spread through unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse with an infected person. Gay HIV positive men with HIV negative partners can still enjoy physically intimate relationships if they follow safe sex practices.

It is important to remember that the virus is transmitted by bodily fluids – for men this includes, blood, ejaculate and pre-ejaculate – entering the bloodstream. Remember that the risk goes both ways. For example, it is commonly believed that only the partner who is penetrated (the 'bottom') is at risk, but HIV can be transmitted to the partner who penetrates (the 'top') via small cuts and abrasions on his penis or via the urethra (the tube that carries urine out from the bladder through the penis).

Unsafe sexual activities

Unsafe sexual activities include:

- Unprotected anal sex, since the virus can enter the bloodstream through mucus membranes or small cuts or abrasions
- Withdrawing before ejaculation, since pre-ejaculate fluid can contain the virus
- Using pre-ejaculate as a lubricant prior to anal intercourse
- Sucking ejaculate from the anus (felching)
- Activities involving razors or shaving, as blood can be drawn from small nicks and cuts
- Any sexual activity that draws blood.

Safe sexual activities

Sexual activities that are considered safe include:

- Kissing
- Cuddling
- Stroking and massage
- Masturbation
- Mutual masturbation
- Ejaculating on unbroken skin
- Urinating on unbroken skin
- Oral sex (with a condom or no ejaculate in the mouth)
- Protected anal intercourse (using condoms).

Safer sex suggestions

Some suggestions for safer sex, including when to avoid some practices:

- **Anal sex** – use condoms and plenty of water-based lubricant.
- **Oral sex** – there are a small number of recorded cases of people getting HIV from performing oral sex and taking ejaculate into their mouth. In almost all of these cases, the person had herpes sores, wounds, cuts or infections in their mouth. It isn't easy for HIV to enter the bloodstream through the mouth or throat when sucking. However, to be sure of being safe, the HIV-positive partner shouldn't ejaculate into their partner's mouth. To further reduce the risk, a condom can be worn. The HIV-negative partner should avoid performing oral sex if they have cuts or sores in their mouth, a throat infection, have recently undergone dental work or have just brushed or flossed their teeth.

- **Penetration of the anus with finger or fist** – avoid if there are cuts or abrasions on the fingers, hand or arm. To be absolutely sure, wear a latex glove.
- **Licking and kissing the anus (oral–anal contact or ‘rimming’)** – HIV can’t be transmitted via oral–anal contact, but other diseases can. These include hepatitis A and intestinal parasites and bacteria (for example, shigella). Use a barrier such as a dental dam or clear plastic wrap (but not the ‘microwave-safe’ variety – it has tiny holes in it).
- **Urinating on skin** – avoid this practice if there are cuts or abrasions on the skin. Don’t allow urine to come in contact with the eyes or mouth, in case there is blood in the urine.
- **Faeces** – HIV can be transmitted if there is blood in the faeces. Don’t allow faeces to come in contact with the eyes, mouth or cuts on the skin. Other illnesses, such as hepatitis and intestinal parasites, can also be transmitted by faeces.
- **Sex toys** – always put a condom on any sex toy (such as a dildo) before use. Wash all sex toys after use with warm water and soap. Consider having a separate collection of sex toys for each partner.

What you can do after unprotected sex

Sometimes, a couple may slip and have some form of unprotected sex. Suggestions include:

- If the broken skin of the HIV negative partner comes in contact with the ejaculate, blood, urine or faeces of their HIV positive partner, wash well with warm water and soap.
- Seek advice from your doctor. Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is a month-long course of medications for people who have been exposed to HIV. To be most effective, they should be commenced within 72 hours of exposure. It is best to take them as early as possible after exposure. These drugs can be toxic on the body with unpleasant side effects such as vomiting, nausea and lethargy. PEP is not an alternative to safe sex. If you think you have been exposed to HIV, or think you need help, visit www.getpep.info or call 1800 889 887. This is a 24-hour telephone service.
- Talk about the factors that led to the unprotected sex and work out ways to avoid the same mistake in future.

HIV and your relationship

HIV can trigger various relationship problems including:

- **Fear** – both partners could be fearful of the HIV-positive partner developing AIDS or of the HIV-negative partner contracting the virus.
- **Sexual problems** – some people may feel bored and frustrated by the constraints of always practicing safe sex, which can cause tension within the relationship. Sometimes, treatments can also affect the HIV-positive partner’s libido.
- **Insecurity** – the person with HIV may feel insecure and worry that their partner may leave them because of their HIV status.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Victorian AIDS Council/Gay Men’s Health Centre Tel. (03) 9865 6700 or 1800 134 840
- Blood Borne Viruses/Sexually Transmissible Infections Program, Department of Health Victoria Tel. (03) 9096 9174
- Positive Living Centre Tel. (03) 9863 0444
- People Living with HIV/AIDS Vic Inc Tel. (03) 9863 8733
- Melbourne Sexual Health Centre (03) 9341 6200 or 1800 032 017 or TTY 9347 8619
- The Centre Clinic, Northcote Tel. (03) 9481 7155
- The Centre Clinic, St Kilda Tel. (03) 9525 5866
- Education & Resource Centre at The Alfred Tel. (03) 9276 6993

Things to remember

- HIV positive men with HIV negative partners can still enjoy physically intimate relationships.

- Sexual activities that are considered safe include kissing, cuddling, stroking, massage, masturbation, mutual masturbation, oral sex (with no ejaculate in the mouth) and anal sex with a condom using water-based lubricant.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Victorian AIDS Council / Gay Men's Health Centre

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