Q: In what ways do gay and bisexual men living in Canada – individually and as communities – make sense of, incorporate into their understanding, and modify their behaviours based on new biomedical knowledge of HIV?

FINDINGS – Emerging Themes

Undetectable Viral Load, PrEP and Risk Calculation
- For some guys—positive and negative—undetectability and PrEP each provide sufficient reassurance to have condomless sex, while for others it does not.
- Many guys remain committed to condom use despite their confidence in undetectability or PrEP.
- Guys are divided: Are undetectable guys and guys on PrEP safer sexual partners than others?
- Some guys wonder: Can I trust that a sexual partner is really undetectable or on PrEP?

Undetectability as Identity: “The New Negative”
- Many positive guys espouse undetectability as an identity (as opposed to ‘poz’ or ‘positive’) to signify that they are healthy and pose a lower risk of transmission. They felt this helped reduce stigma.
- Some guys question the impact of identifying as undetectable in a context where the concept is not well understood in the community.

Undetectability’s Impact on Fear
- Both positive and negative guys talk about undetectability reducing fear and stigma.
- However, they also point out that some negative guys make no distinction between positive and undetectable.
- Some positive guys say it gives then a sense that they are being responsible.
- Some positive guys worry that it might trivialize HIV.

PrEP and The Sex We Desire?
- Guys question PrEP’s role in the type of sex gay men want. Is PrEP a license to throw caution to the wind or is it a sign of the good gay citizen calculating risk and responding rationally to the threat of HIV infection?
- Especially for men who find condoms an impediment to sexual satisfaction, PrEP promises enhanced sexual pleasure.

PrEP Users: Responsible/Sluts?
- Guys alternatively describe PrEP users as sluts and barebackers who think they are invincible on the other hand, and as responsible, thoughtful and knowledgeable individuals who take care of their health on the other.
- Sometimes they described them as both—responsible sluts.

CONCLUSIONS

Levels of awareness and confidence in undetectability and PrEP and their impact on the risk of HIV transmission vary greatly. Being positive, knowingly interacting with positive guys, or being connected to HIV organizations increased knowledge and confidence levels. Higher-risk HIV-negative participants (>1 sexual partner in the last 3 months + tested >1 time in the last year and/or used recreational drugs in the last 3 months) tended to have lower levels of knowledge and confidence than others.

I spoke to some health professionals. I couldn’t believe that they were all saying the same thing. Wow. So I started having unprotected sex with my positive partner.
Neg, 35-49, VAN

I’m very suspicious of all this stuff.
Neg, 50+, VAN

I wear my undetectability like a badge of honour. I’m very proud to be undetectable.
Pos,<50+, VAN

It’s liberating in every way actually to know that my blood is not infectious and my body fluids are probably not very infectious.
Pos,50+, VAN

If PrEP is available to anyone who wants it, does that mean you’ve got a bunch of guys who think they’re totally invincible and they’re going to go fuck their brains out?
Neg, <35, VAN

I respect the guy. He’s doing what he can while still enjoying sex because a lot of guys don’t enjoy sex when there’s condoms involved.
Pos, 35-49, TO

Maybe they’re sluts and maybe they’re whatever but they’re at least a little bit more thoughtful.
Neg, 50+, VAN

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