What’s the BUZZ on HIV Prevention Among Gay Men?

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Objectives

To examine:

• how gay men are taking up biomedical knowledge of HIV
• how biomedical knowledge of HIV has resonance for their everyday lives
• the discourses men use to make sense of risk and inform their sexual decision-making and practices
• the roles and responsibilities of institutions and service providers in shaping these discourses.
How gay men are responding to:

• Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in HIV-negative partners

• Undetectable viral load in HIV-positive partners

as potential HIV prevention tools
## Focus group composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus group name</th>
<th>Recruitment criteria</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gay men connected to HIV organizations</td>
<td>• Attended a workshop, training or conference on HIV in the past year</td>
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| Gay men in serodiscordant relationships              | • HIV-negative or HIV-positive  
• Currently in relationship that has lasted more than 6 months  
• Partner’s HIV status is different than theirs |
| Sexually active HIV-positive gay men                 | • Has ever received a positive HIV test result  
• Has had sex with >1 man in past 3 months                                                                                                         |
| HIV-negative gay men at ‘high risk’                  | • Has never received a positive HIV test result  
• Has been tested for HIV more than twice in last year and/or has used recreational drugs in past 3 months  
• Has had sex with >1 man in past 3 months                                                                                                           |
Focus group demographics

City
- Toronto: 33
- Montreal: 22
- Vancouver: 31

Serostatus
- Neg: 50
- Poz: 36

Age
- <35: 29
- 35-49: 31
- 50+: 26

N = 86
Vignettes

**Early HIV Therapy Sharply Curbs Transmission**

Treatment is prevention: HPTN 052 study shows 96% reduction in transmission when HIV-positive partner starts treatment early

**HIV study hailed as biggest 2011 breakthrough: Findings indicated antiretroviral drugs can dramatically halt HIV transmission**

**Clinical trial showing drugs as effective as condoms at preventing HIV is declared breakthrough of 2011**

**UK experts: successful treatment is "as effective as consistent condom use" in reducing HIV transmission**

**Challenges of treatment as prevention for gay men: Nearly all participants in the HPTN 052 study were heterosexuals**

...
PrEP – Considerations

- Awareness varied across focus group types
  - Ranged from never heard about it to being on PrEP
  - Least aware: negative men at high risk
- Skepticism
- Concerns about effectiveness and toxicity
- Concerns about access
- Weighing PrEP against condoms
PrEP – Awareness

This is new on me.  
*Neg, <35, Van*

PEP and PrEP are two different things.  
I stand corrected. Thank you. I didn’t know that.  
*Neg, 50+, Van*

I thought it was something like still in research. I didn’t know that somebody is actually using it.  
*Neg, <35, TO*

I honestly had no… like I didn’t… like I knew about there being some sort of drug but I wasn’t too much aware of it to be honest with you.  
*Neg, <35, Van*

If you take one pill a day, the same thing as HIV medication, there’s a good chance that if you are engaging in unsafe activity, that you will remain negative by taking these medications. So that’s what PrEP is.  
*Pos, 35-49, TO*
A miracle pill not to protect yourself, exposing yourself to risk of infection... This makes no sense to me.

Neg, <35, Montreal

I thought about it briefly and decided it wasn’t really for me and didn’t consider it anymore because with him I already feel safe enough and with anybody other than him I’m using a condom anyway.

Neg, 35-49, VAN

But nobody is saying 100%. So I’m very suspicious of all this stuff.

Neg, 50+, VAN

I’ve heard about people taking it. But I personally never encountered one that I would have sex with. I would feel more comfortable but I would still push for the person to use the condom as well.

Pos, 50+, TO
If you’re using condoms I think PrEP would be ridiculous to use. I think condoms are way safe enough to stop transmission and PrEP would be just overkill. Why would you put your liver through that much toxicity over the years, chemicals, if you’re using condoms? If you’re going to go condomless and you’re negative and you want to stay that way, I think it’s a good option for you. I mean I think you should do it if you’re negative.

*Pos, 35-49, Van*
So realistically I’m HIV-positive. My partner is HIV-negative. PrEP, would I consider that an option? I would still use condoms, I think. I don’t know actually. But in terms of accessibility to PrEP, it’s unrealistic in terms of my financial situation.

*Pos, 35-49, TO*

- Well it costs about 900 dollars a month.
- Oh, per month? Forget it.

*Pos, 50+, MTL
Neg, <35, MTL*
PrEP – The sex we desire?

Two conflicting tropes:

• PrEP introduced into a context where gay men are already pursuing the type of sex they desire, allowing them to do so with lowered risk of HIV.

• Is it a sign of the good gay citizen calculating risk and responding rationally

• PrEP-users as more sexually liberated and free from the ‘safe sex’ mantra of condom use, especially men who find condoms an impediment to sexual satisfaction.

• Will PrEP open the way to a new (or re-gained) era of sexual freedom?

VERSUS

• PrEP provides a false sense of security in the pursuit of condomless sex, and is helping to precipitate it.

• Is PrEP a license to throw caution to the wind?
PrEP as Ir/responsible

If PrEP is available to anyone who wants to take 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? I wish that we had PrEP for my personal situation.

Neg, <35, VAN

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

Pos, 35-49, TO

I know he’s negative and on PrEP and tested every three months. That’s like everything a bottom could wish for.

Neg, <35, VAN

We’re pill takers because we like to fuck... Well maybe you’re better off not taking medication and respecting your sexual health.

Pos, <35, MTL
PrEP – Benefits

It means that they want to have the possibility of unprotected sex, a bit like me. S-L-U-T.

Neg, 50+, VAN

They’re in a place in their life where they can measure risk and consider all the options and they’ve been a bit more thoughtful in taking that step to protect themselves.

Neg, 50+, VAN

We don’t use condoms when I top and I’m positive. It’s something I think if someone wants to take, it should be available. It’s not at the moment in BC. You have to pay for it.... I wish that we had PrEP for my personal situation.

Pos, <35, Van

We’re virtually in a monogamous serodiscordant relationship and it’s that added level of protection with the risk of long term medical side effects. For us I think it would be great if it were available.

Neg, <35, Van
PrEP – Dis/trust in sexual interaction

If you’re telling me the truth and you really are negative, there’s still always going to be a risk, a minor risk. I just would feel terrible knowingly. I know at some point in my life somewhere along the line I probably have infected somebody unknowingly, unwittingly due to stupidity. But it’s not something I consciously want to do.

_Pos, 35-49, TO_

It’s the fact that he specifies that he’s negative, on PrEP, and tested every three months... Why would I take that as a guarantee of my own sexual health as a bottom? First of all, what am I doing on a site like BBRT if I want to stay negative, you know?

_Pos, <35, MTL_
UNDETECTABLE
VIRAL LOAD
Undetectability - Awareness

• Considerable differences across FG types
  • Least aware: at-risk negative focus group participants
  • Most aware: positive men, men in serodiscordant relationships, men connected to HIV sector
  • Some never heard; others well-versed
• Affected by:
  • being positive, interacting with positive men, being connected to HIV organizations
  • geography (urban); generations
• Educator role; frustration at community ignorance
• Surprise not more information circulating
Undetectability - Awareness

- If someone knows what undetectable is, they are positive or...
- HIV-negative spouses know that because their partner is positive.

*Pos, 35-49, MTL*
*Neg, 35-49, MTL*

People ask, is it a cake recipe? It’s undetectable lube that you don’t feel? They won’t find you on their GPS?

*Neg, <35, MTL*

I was fairly well educated about it. I was tested every six months. I’m actually surprised I didn’t hear about the zero load stuff earlier.

*Neg, 35-49, VAN*

In the Village everyone knows what it means to be undetectable. In outlying regions when I say that I’m poz undetectable, I get three question marks.

*Pos, 50+, MTL*
Undetectability as Identity

- Many HIV-positive men espoused undetectability as an identity (as opposed to ‘poz’ or ‘positive’)
- Way to signify: healthy and lower risk of transmission
- Way to reduce stigma
- Some questioned impact when concept is not well understood in the community
Undetectability as Identity

I always say undetectable is the new negative. Because it’s next to no risk.
*Pos, 50+, VAN*

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

Undetectable is the new vogue. All the cool kids are getting it.
*Pos, 50+, VAN*

It takes the emphasis off the illness and puts it on my health. HIV-positive has such baggage attached to it and undetectable doesn’t really have that baggage.
*Pos, 35-49, VAN*

I think that quote actually does a lot for reducing HIV stigma. If more people knew that undetectable is kind of like negative...
*Neg, <35, VAN*

If you don’t actually know what that means, it sounds good, the word ‘undetectable.’ It sounds like a good thing.
*Neg, <35, VAN*
Undetectability – Risk calculation

• Positive men more confident that UVL = lower risk than negative
  • Some opposing views on both sides
• Many emphasize some risk remains
• For some positive and negative: undetectability = enough reassurance to have condomless sex; others not
• Many negative men learn from positive partners
• Some positive men cautious, feel higher responsibility
• Participants divided: undetectable men = safer option? Sought out?
• Assumptions: condomless sex = positive
• Some discourse marked by moral judgment
Undetectability – Risk calculation (1)

My preference is to have sex with other undetectable guys and then guys who are positive and then negative guys who aren’t dumb.  
*Pos, 35-49, VAN*

You also can’t lose sight of the fact that it’s a crapshoot. You might get away with it once. You might get away with it twice. But then one day you might wake up and get that phone call.  
*Pos, 35-49, TO*

I would not have sex without a condom. That’s not negotiable... And then to see this messaging, it’s kind of like, maybe it is safe to have sex without a condom or that there are different levels of risk.  
*Neg, <35, VAN*
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

They become a bit like invincible and it’s like a permission to bareback.

Neg, 35-49, MTL

A lot of negative guys are seeking out undetectable partners because a) they’re being tested every 3 months for their blood work and b) they’re concerned about their health and wellbeing and their risk of HIV transmission is zero to extremely low, if any.

Pos, 50+, VAN
Undetectability – Impact on Fear

- Reduction in fear and stigma
- Positive men feel they are being responsible; impact on decisions about taking treatment
- Some concern about trivialization of HIV
- Stigma remains; some negative men make no distinction between positive and undetectable
- Generational differences noted
  - Positive men: see young as more knowledgeable
  - Negative men: see young as uninformed
Undetectability – Impact on Fear

The fact that statistically I’m as safe, roughly, as a condom; it’s a very nice feeling.
Pos, 50+, VAN

I watched a lot of people die. When I have made an error that way and it’s happened once or twice, it has cost me weeks of depression. I feel like a gatekeeper in a way.
Pos, 50+, VAN

The word undetectable, I agree with you, it trivializes the risk of transmission, enormously.
Pos, <35, MTL

I think the issue that I had as topping was wearing a condom and not being able to keep an erection. Now I can actually perform better and enjoy being a top more without a condom.
Neg, 50+, VAN

I’m having better sex now than I have ever. I allow myself to enjoy where in the past I don’t think I would have been as uninhibited.
Neg, 50+, VAN
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