

## Wellbeing of Men who have Sex with Men: Prevention of HIV

### Key Facts

- Men who have sex with men are the group most affected by HIV in Scotland
- Condomless anal sex is the main route of transmission for MSM
- Anal sex forms an important and central aspect of the sexual life of many MSM
- Condoms are highly effective in preventing HIV transmission
- HIV Pre Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) is also effective in reducing the risk of HIV
- Many MSM are unaware of their HIV status
- The risks some MSM take with their sexual health maybe a symptom of the wider issues such as problem alcohol use, low self esteem, mental health problems and experience of violence and childhood sexual abuse.

### What can I do?

- Encourage the use of condoms and know where to signpost MSM to get them
- Offer HIV testing explaining the benefits of knowledge of HIV status
- Raise awareness of Pre and Post Exposure Prophylaxis for HIV (and how to get it)
- Reduce the stigma associated with anal sex
- Consider potential wider issues on risk taking behaviour

### Background

Adult MSM are the group most affected by HIV in the Scotland with an estimated 4.5% MSM living with HIV <sup>1</sup>. Since 2004 sex between men has been the route of transmission for 71% of all HIV diagnosis acquired within Scotland <sup>2</sup>.

The number of MSM living with a diagnosed HIV infection has doubled over the past decade. Although this rise partly due to the availability of antiretroviral therapy (ART), which increases life expectancy it also reflects significant levels of continuing HIV transmission.

Over the past 20 years treatment has transformed HIV from a fatal infection into a chronic manageable condition and people living with HIV in the UK can now expect to live into old age if diagnosed promptly. Late diagnosis rates are falling but in 2015 30% of MSM diagnosed with HIV were diagnosed late<sup>3</sup>.

For many people, treatment means one tablet daily with no or few side effects. Over 90% of MSM living with a diagnosed HIV infection are receiving treatment. and almost 78% are virally suppressed with a negligible risk of passing on their infection through sex<sup>3</sup>.

With such a high coverage of ART, it is likely that the HIV epidemic among MSM is largely due to ongoing incidence from men unaware of their infection<sup>4</sup>. According to the latest UK report an estimated 12% of gay / bisexual men are unaware of their infection<sup>3</sup>. Men make assumptions about HIV status, their own and that of other men<sup>1</sup>. Increased and frequent HIV testing is therefore vital to control transmission.

Primary care staff are ideally placed to discuss the benefits of knowledge of HIV status. Testing is also available at sexual health clinics. In addition postal testing kits, available free of charge from Terence Higgins Trust Scotland <https://www.tht.org.uk/sexual-health/About-HIV/HIV-postal-test> offer men the convenience of testing at home with results available by phone within five working days. Men who choose to buy HIV test kits on the high street or online should be advised to buy a self test kit from a reputable source and to make sure the HIV test kit has a CE mark and is clearly intended for self testing<sup>5</sup>.

Condomless anal sex is the main route of HIV transmission among MSM. Condomless anal sex is high risk because the mucosa lining the rectum is easily damaged, and the anal mucous is rich in the immune system cells that HIV targets. Receptive anal sex is riskier than insertive anal sex but many factors can affect the likelihood of transmission, such as the presence of another sexually transmitted infection (STI) or the viral load of a sexual partner.

NHS Tayside have developed an on line resource for gay and bisexual men available at <http://www.menonlytayside.com>. This includes a 'riskometer' which gives some idea of the risk of transmission of HIV according to sexual acts.

Condoms are also available from Sexual Health clinics across Scotland, Most services also make them available free 14 to 19 year olds who have signed up to a 'C or condom card' at a variety of outlets such as local libraries and pharmacies. In Dumfries & Galloway condoms and lube are also available free of charge by post in a plain envelope to men who have sex with men. Email: [dgsexualhealth@nhs.net](mailto:dgsexualhealth@nhs.net)

A recent community engagement project to explore the experiences, thoughts, feelings and needs of MSM in Scotland concluded that that for men who have anal sex it is a marker of trust and intimacy and men welcome discussions about what anal sex means to them<sup>1</sup>. Sex without condoms was described as being 'problemised' by services purely in relation to HIV/STI transmission. There is a need to understand the meaning of anal sex to gay men and reduce the stigma associated with it. If anal sex is only obliquely reference to in terms of condom use this will be a barrier to successful and meaningful engagement with men around HIV / STI prevention<sup>1</sup>.

**Pre Exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)** for HIV is available free from sexual health clinics in Scotland. It is for people who are HIV negative and at high risk of acquiring HIV. PrEP does

not protect against any STIs other than HIV. It will only be prescribed to people who meet the eligibility criteria which can be found at <https://prep.scot/>

In 2015, two studies (PROUD in the UK and IPERGAY in France) reported 86% reduction in acquiring HIV in gay men and trans women using PrEP<sup>6</sup>

Depending on the type of sex and how often it takes place pills need to be taken every day or only around sex.

Less than 10% of people report mild nausea, mild bowel disturbance, bloating and headache. These side effects usually stop within the first month.

Occasionally PrEP can cause more serious side effects that reduce kidney function. Men who are prescribed PrEP need to attend a sexual health clinic regularly for monitoring of their renal function and HIV status. Men buying PrEP on line can also have the necessary monitoring done free of charge at sexual health clinics.

For those not on PrEP, **post exposure prophylaxis (PEP)** for HIV is available. It is a month of antiretroviral therapy taken after exposure to a person known to have or thought to be at high risk of HIV. PEP should be started as soon as possible and definitely within 72 hours. It is available from most sexual health clinics and emergency departments. For more information see the West of Scotland Risk Assessment for PEP found at <http://www.wosexualhealthmcn.org.uk>

A recent case note review of men Greater Glasgow & Clyde and Lothian revealed that men newly diagnosed with HIV had a number of 'vulnerabilities' including problem alcohol use, low self esteem, mental health problems and experience of violence and childhood sexual abuse. The risks they are taking with their sexual health maybe a symptom of these wider issues. Infrequent or never testing for HIV was associated with social deprivation<sup>1</sup>.

## References

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