

How HIV is passed on during sex between men

CHAPS

Terrence
HIGGINS
TRUST



Ready for action

Second edition

Before getting down to action

Thanks to safer sex and condoms, gay and bisexual men can enjoy great sex – and lots of it! Safer sex has stopped millions of us around the world from getting or passing on HIV. Most of us use condoms most of the time.

But sometimes we don't, thinking what we're doing isn't so risky. That's when HIV makes its move – as over 2,000 gay and bisexual men find out each year in the UK when they're diagnosed with HIV.*

Although sex can never be totally risk-free, you can decide what level of risk you're happy with. This booklet gives you facts about what makes sex less or more risky.

Don't forget: even if something is less likely to pass the virus on, it can still happen. And the more often you do it, the more chance that it will happen. A lot of the things described in this booklet as 'less risky' would actually be quite risky if you did them often.

And if you have anal sex, condoms are by far the best way to protect yourself and others.

Sources: condom use figures: Gay Men's Sex Survey 2006. UK HIV figures: Health Protection Agency, 2006



Where is HIV?

If a man has HIV the virus is usually passed on in his:

- blood
- cum.

HIV can also be picked up from pre-cum, the clear fluid that comes from your cock when you're turned on. The virus is also found in anal mucus, the slimy lining of the inside of the arse.

HIV isn't found in high enough levels to infect someone in:

- spit
- tears
- piss
- sweat.

What kind of sex is risky?

There's a risk in any sex that lets infected blood or cum (pre-cum or anal mucus too) into another man's body – and then into his bloodstream.

The vast majority of us who get HIV pick it up from fucking or getting fucked without condoms. Having sex that doesn't involve fucking greatly lowers the risk of getting or passing on HIV. A smaller number get it from sucking someone off.

There have been no reported cases of anyone getting HIV from:

- kissing
- 'water sports' (playing with piss)
- rimming someone.

Two men wanking each other is safe as long as they don't use each other's cum as lubricant.

Is HIV easily passed on?

Compared to other infections HIV isn't that easy to pick up. Even the highest risk sex – fucking without condoms – might not always pass the virus on. Although HIV isn't passed on every time you take a risk, there's a chance it could be passed on any time you take one.

Some things make it more likely; for example, the chances are very high during unprotected sex with someone who's only had HIV for a few weeks or months. This booklet tells you what you need to know about what makes things less or more risky.



Is it too late once HIV is inside someone?

No! After unsafe sex or if a condom breaks it's possible to stop someone becoming HIV positive if you act fast.

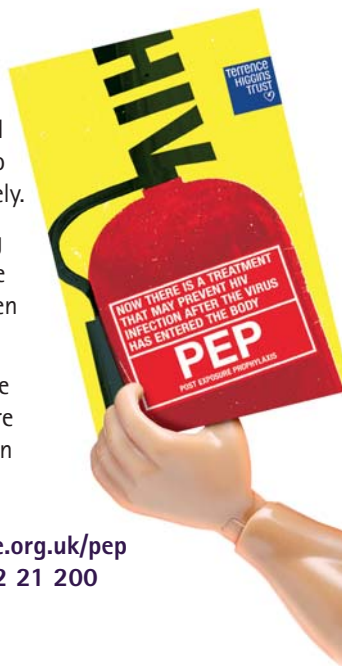
When HIV gets into someone's bloodstream it takes time before the virus permanently infects them. Starting something called PEP (post exposure prophylaxis) during this short period can kill the virus before this happens. PEP is a month long course of HIV drugs available from sexual health clinics and some hospitals.

PEP's not guaranteed to work and can have side effects (eg, diarrhoea and feeling sick), so isn't to be used instead of condoms. But it seems to make getting infected much less likely.

PEP has the best chance of working if it's started within 24 hours of the risk happening. But it might be given up to 72 hours (3 days).

One day you – or someone you have sex with – might need PEP. For more information about it, when it's given and where to get it check out:

- this leaflet in gay venues
- the web site www.chapsonline.org.uk/pep
- or call THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200



Condoms

Of all the things covered in this booklet nothing (including PEP) is as good at stopping HIV as a condom. Used properly they have a very low failure rate. But each year about 1 in 10 of us has a condom rip or come off. How you use a condom makes a big difference to the chance of it breaking or coming off.

Some tips:

- Use a size that fits – you can buy larger and smaller brands.
- When opening condoms be careful not to tear them with teeth or jewellery.
- Try not to unroll or stretch a condom too much before putting it on.
- A condom can only go on a cock correctly if it's fully erect.
- Roll the condom all the way down (if it's only halfway down it's likely to come off).
- Avoid getting air trapped under it – squeeze air out of the end before rolling it on.
- Wearing two condoms means they'll rub against each other, causing them to split or slip off.
- After about 30 minutes rubbers are more likely to rip. Keep checking or put on a fresh one.
- After 'coming', grip the condom at the base of the dick before pulling out so it doesn't get left inside.

TIP

Lack of experience is linked to things going wrong, so practise using condoms when wanking.



'Active' or 'passive'

There's a difference in risk between fucking (being 'top' or 'active') and getting fucked (being 'bottom' or 'passive').

Here's why...

The biggest risk comes from infected cum getting into someone's arse. The lining of the inside of the arse is delicate and easily torn. It also absorbs liquids (the reason doctors sometimes put medicines up the arse). This absorbent and easily torn arse lining lets HIV (in blood, cum or pre-cum) get through it and into the bloodstream.

So...

If you're HIV negative:

FUCKING = LESS RISK of getting HIV

BEING FUCKED = MORE RISK of getting HIV

If you have HIV:

BEING FUCKED = LESS RISK of passing on HIV

FUCKING = MORE RISK of passing on HIV

Lube

No lubricant means more friction, which makes it more likely a condom rips or comes off.

- Spit's no good – there's never enough and it dries quickly.
- Water-based lubes are needed (eg, KY, Wetstuff, Liquid Silk). Oil-based ones weaken rubbers, so avoid body or skin creams, Vaseline or any oil used in cooking.
- Use lots of lube on the condom-covered dick and in and around the arse-hole.
- Keep lube on the outside of the condom. Lube underneath it (on the dick) means condoms slide off.
- Avoid lubes with Non-oxynol 9 in them (the packaging will say). This ingredient irritates the inside of the arse, making it more likely HIV is passed on.

For more info and tips on using condoms, including tips on staying hard when using them, check out www.chapsonline.org.uk/getiton

TIP

Yes to water-based lube. No if it's oil-based.

Can an HIV negative man who is 'active' get HIV?

Yes. Many have. When his dick goes inside a guy's arse, it can touch blood or anal mucus, both with HIV in them. The virus then gets into his bloodstream through the absorbent and easily damaged skin of:

- his foreskin
- the head of his cock
- or through his urethra
(the pipe in his dick that piss comes down).

It's worth remembering that doing the fucking is how millions of straight men have got infected from women. As vaginas are tougher and less likely to bleed compared to arses, fucking arses carries even more risk of getting HIV.

TIP

If you're HIV positive, there's less risk if you're 'passive'. If you're HIV negative, there's less risk if you're 'active'.

Pulling out before 'coming'

A man getting fucked by a guy with HIV is a definite risk. If the positive man also 'comes' inside his arse that risk is even higher.

HIV in cum soaks through the delicate, easily damaged inside lining of the arse and into the bloodstream.

A man pulling out before shooting his load cuts this risk. But there's still some risk because:

- despite their best intentions, it can be hard for men to control when they 'come'
- HIV can be in pre-cum (the clear fluid that comes from your cock when you're turned on). So the virus could be passed on if this fluid gets inside the arse.

TIP

Cum 'on him, not in him' is better.



More men or fewer

Each new man you have an unprotected fuck with means another chance HIV might be passed on. More men means more who could have:

- **a different HIV status to you**
- **or a sexually transmitted infection (which makes it easier for HIV to be passed on – see p15 for how).**

Not all men with HIV are equally infectious. If you're HIV negative and fucking unsafely with lots of men, not only will some of them have HIV, some could be very infectious because they have very high viral loads (see p14 for more).

TIP

Fewer men means less risk. There's less overall risk if you cut down on unprotected fucking or have other kinds of sex instead.



A long or a short fuck

During an unprotected fuck HIV can pass from one man to another in just a few seconds. But the longer it lasts, the more likely this is to happen. The longer you're both fucking, the more chance of bleeding or sore skin – or cum or pre-cum getting inside the arse.

TIP

Stopping after a few seconds is safer than carrying on. A condom from the start is safest.

Rough or gentle

Heavy, forceful fucking means more chance cocks and arses get damaged. Tiny cuts, grazed or sore skin, or bleeding give HIV an easier way out of one man and into another.

Gentle fucking and using lubricant lower the chance of skin damage.

TIP

Less risk if you take it easy and use lots of lube.



Bleeding in the arse

The lining of the inside of the arse is delicate and full of blood vessels. Taking a cock, dildos, fist or fingers up it can cause soreness or tiny rips or bleeding in this lining. This damage may be too small to see, or be out of sight, inside the arse.

If an HIV negative man's arse bleeds...

- **this damage leaves him more open to HIV-infected cum, pre-cum or blood getting through this broken skin and into his bloodstream.**

If an HIV positive man's arse bleeds...

- **infected blood from his arse can get on and into the dick of the man who's fucking him.**

These make bleeding in the arse more likely:

- **a rough fuck – especially without lube**
- **sniffing poppers when being fucked (see p13)**
- **taking things up the arse (eg, cocks, fingers, dildos)**
- **being fisted (especially before fucking)**
- **damaged skin in or around the bum from sexually transmitted infections**
- **or taking drugs up the arse.**

Dildos, fingers, fists, etc can spread HIV if they go from one man's arse to another. Covering with a fresh condom (or latex glove) with each new arse takes away this risk.

TIP

Stop if you see blood. Avoid things that make bleeding more likely.

Poppers

Studies show men who sniff poppers when getting fucked without a condom seem much more likely to get HIV (compared to men who do the same thing but without poppers). Possible reasons could be:

- **Poppers open blood vessels wider, causing more blood to go into the arse. This could make it easier for HIV to get through these blood vessels, especially if using poppers makes the inside of the arse more likely to bleed during anal sex.**
- **Men who use poppers might be more likely to have rougher sex (with more bleeding).**
- **Some researchers think poppers might weaken the immune system for a few days, leaving someone more open to picking up HIV. But others believe poppers don't do this.**

More information about poppers and HIV is at www.chapsonline.org.uk/biology

TIP

If you don't have HIV, avoid poppers if being fucked. Or make sure a condom's used.



Viral load

Heard of 'viral load'? It means how much HIV is in the body of someone who has the virus. Viral load can be measured, normally in a blood test. Viral load can be 'high', 'low' or 'undetectable.' If it's 'high' that means:

- **more chance that person will get sick**
- **more chance they'll pass on HIV during unprotected sex.**

So viral load is linked to how infectious someone is. The lower their viral load, the less likely they might give HIV to others. Viral load (and how infectious blood, cum, etc is) can be very high:

- **in the first weeks or months after someone gets HIV (before they probably even realise they have it)**
- **if their HIV drugs aren't working (or they're not taking any)**
- **or if they're run down or have another infection, including sexually transmitted ones.**

'Undetectable viral load'

'Undetectable viral load' doesn't mean 'no HIV there.' It definitely still is but the test isn't sensitive enough to measure these low levels. Unprotected sex when someone's viral load is 'undetectable' may be safer but it's not totally safe because:

- **there could still be enough virus to infect others**
- **viral load may have gone up since the last test (it can go up and down over time)**
- **the tests measure HIV in blood. But levels can be much higher in cum, pre-cum or anal mucus.**

TIP

The higher the viral load, the more risk.

STIs mean more risk

Not using condoms leaves you much more open to sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like gonorrhoea, hepatitis C, herpes and syphilis. These are all much easier to catch than HIV. The more men you have sex with – especially if it's unprotected – the more likely you'll get infections.

Having an STI:

- **makes men with HIV more likely to pass HIV on**
- **makes HIV negative men more likely to pick HIV up.**

Here's how HIV 'piggy backs' on STIs

HIV gets out of one person's bloodstream and into someone else's through the delicate, absorbent skin inside the arse, on the head of the cock or in the mouth and throat. If an STI makes skin here sore, inflamed or bleed, it's even easier for HIV to get through it.

But it's not just about skin damage. When someone has HIV and an STI, their HIV viral load goes up, making their blood, cum, etc, more infectious. This is because their immune system must fight both infections, so can't put up as strong a fight against HIV until the STI is treated.

TIP

Regular check-ups are recommended (every 3 months if you have sex with lots of men). If you think you might have an STI, waste no time getting it seen to.

Fucking without condoms with men who share your HIV status

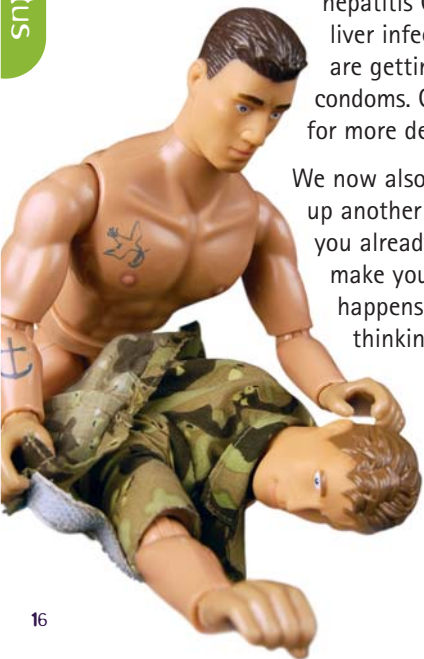
Are you both HIV negative?

Then you can't pass on a virus that's not there in the first place.

Or both HIV positive?

Unprotected sex can't lead to a new HIV infection if you both already have it. But you both leave yourselves open to other infections that are impossible or hard to cure, like herpes or hepatitis C. Hep C is a very serious liver infection many men with HIV are getting through sex without condoms. Check out www.hepinfo.org for more details.

We now also know it's possible to pick up another type of HIV than the one you already have, one that could make you ill faster. How often this happens isn't clear but it's worth thinking about.



Things to think about

You might try to fuck without condoms only with men with the same HIV status as you. This takes away the risk if:

- you're as sure as you can be you both have the same HIV status
- you talk about HIV. It's dangerous to assume that nothing being said means you must be the same. And it's very risky judging each other's HIV status on age, looks or what they're into.
- both of you base what you think your status is on HIV tests, not assuming or hoping for the best
- you don't rely on test results that might be out-of-date, especially if risks have been taken since testing
- and you feel you can trust someone to give you an accurate answer. Of gay men with HIV, 1 in 4 don't realise they have it.

A negative test result can be meaningless if someone didn't wait three months between the test and the last time they took a risk of getting HIV. It takes up to three months for signs of infection (antibodies) to show up in the blood. A person can get a negative test during these three months but be infected (and be very infectious).

Finally, imagine this. A man is in the habit of fucking without condoms with people he thinks share his HIV status. But he gets it wrong and becomes infected without realising. He's now got very high levels of HIV in his cum, blood, etc. He's now putting anyone he fucks without a condom with at very high risk.

TIP

Assume nothing. A recent test is the best guide to whether either of you have HIV or not.

How safe is sucking?



How safe is sucking?

There's no simple, exact answer. Those of us who get HIV nearly always have had both anal and oral sex without a condom. So it's hard to know just how the virus got into the body.

Some people feel sure they got HIV from sucking. Others say they got infected from blow jobs but later say they did in fact have anal sex without a condom.

Although some studies find no-one getting HIV from oral sex, we know it does happen. Other studies suggest up to around 5% of infections might come from oral sex. That means the amount of infections among gay men that come from unprotected anal sex is somewhere between about 95% and close to 100%. For more on the risk from oral sex, including these studies, check out www.chapsonline.org.uk/biology

It's usually harder for HIV to get through the lining of the mouth because it's tougher compared to inside the arse. HIV infections from blow jobs usually involve cum getting in the mouth and/or cuts, sores, infections or inflammation in the mouth, throat (or dick).

If a guy with HIV has a high viral load that increases the risk too.

The more men you have oral sex with, the more risk – especially if cum gets in the mouth.

If you're HIV negative

Being sucked off is virtually without risk. The saliva of the man with HIV doesn't have enough virus in it to infect someone. The only possible risk would be if his mouth was bleeding.

When sucking:

- Try not to take cum in your mouth. Pre-cum could also have HIV in it.
- Asking men not to 'come' in your mouth before you suck them means more chance they'll do what you want.
- If a man 'comes' in your mouth, get it out as fast as you can.
- Avoid sucking if you have a sore throat or any cuts, rashes, inflammation or infections in your mouth or throat – or if these are on his dick.
- Gonorrhoea in the throat usually causes no symptoms, so think about getting checked for it regularly, especially if you suck a lot of men.
- Flossing or brushing your teeth can make your gums bleed. Avoid this in the hour before you suck. Mouthwash can take away some of the mouth's natural protection against infections. Instead to freshen breath use gum or rub toothpaste on your teeth.
- Avoid sucking if you've had work done on your teeth in the last week or two.

Spit or swallow?

There's probably little difference. What's important is getting cum out of your mouth fast.

Spitting cum out could bring it into contact with the mouth and gums (which might be bleeding or have cuts).

Swallowing lets it touch your throat. Stomach acid could kill HIV. But the virus is more likely to get into your bloodstream through the lining of your mouth or throat long before it reaches your stomach.

If you have HIV

Sucking a man off is virtually without risk. Your saliva doesn't have enough HIV in it to infect him. The only possible risk to him would be if your mouth was bleeding.

When being sucked off:

- **Avoid 'coming' in someone's mouth.**
- **If you know your viral load's high, think again about being sucked off, especially 'coming' in someone's mouth.**
- **Avoid being sucked off if you have cuts, sores or rashes on your dick – or these are on his mouth.**
- **Get sexually transmitted infections treated quickly (they raise levels of HIV in your pre-cum, cum and blood).**

If you're worried about the risk from sucking, you could use condoms. Flavoured ones taste less of rubber.

TIP

Avoiding cum in the mouth lowers the risk.

Rimming

Rimming is a risk for some infections, especially hepatitis A (which you can be vaccinated against for free at clinics). But there have been no recorded cases of someone getting HIV from rimming someone.

The only possible risk would come from cuts, sores (including herpes), bleeding (eg, from haemorrhoids or warts) around the arse of the guy being rimmed or on the mouth of the man rimming. Broken skin, tiny cuts and bleeding is more likely after anal sex, fisting or arse play with dildos. You might want to avoid rimming after doing these. Blood can occasionally be in shit too.

If you're worried about any infections you could rim through a barrier, like a condom cut into a square or non-microwavable cling film.

TIP

Vaccination against hepatitis A is a 'must' if you like rimming.

Fingers and fists

There's minimal risk from fingering. HIV cannot get into or out of unbroken skin. There would only be a risk if the skin of the finger had on it small cuts or a rash and/or if the inside of the arse was bleeding or damaged (eg, from cuts or infections).

Fisting is classed as low risk as it doesn't involve infected cum getting inside an arse. But fisting can cause anal bleeding which makes the risk higher, especially if you fuck without condoms too.

If the fister has HIV

Fisting is unlikely to pass on HIV as the virus cannot get out through a hand or forearm that has unbroken skin. But if his skin had cuts, sores or inflammation these would give HIV a way out of his body and into the arse being fisted.

If the fister is HIV negative

There's a risk from HIV in blood (or anal mucus, the slimy lining inside his arse) from the arse of a positive guy. Any cuts, rashes or inflamed skin on the fister's hand or forearm give HIV a way into his bloodstream through this broken skin.



HIV could get through breaks in the skin that are very small – possibly too small to notice.

Fisters can use latex gloves (with special water-based fisting lube), available from some safer sex organisations or on sale online or in gay sex shops. If gloves aren't used, the following make cuts and bleeding in the arse less likely:

- **keeping nails short**
- **using lots of lube**
- **going slowly**
- **not using poppers (or drugs that mean you won't feel internal damage).**

If a condom's not used, it's even more risky to fist, then fuck an arse. This is because the arse is more likely to be bleeding from the fisting. Fucking first, then fisting is less risky.

Enemas or douching before fisting remove the mucous lining of the arse, which protects against infections. Without this protection getting HIV could be more likely.

Fisting can cause serious damage if not done carefully by someone with experience. You can learn more at www.hardcell.org.uk

TIP

Gloves cut the risk of fisting. Avoid fucking without a condom an arse that's just been fisted.



‘Water sports’

Infectious levels of HIV have never been found in piss and there have been no reported cases of the virus being passed on during ‘water sports’ (including taking piss in the mouth). Urine on unbroken skin is safe. If it gets in the mouth, in the arse or on skin with cuts, rashes, etc there’s a theoretical risk but only if there’s blood in the urine. Blood can be in piss if someone has kidney stones or a bladder infection.

TIP

There have been no recorded cases of HIV being passed on in piss.

‘Cut’ or ‘uncut’

Studies show circumcised (‘cut’) straight men are less likely to pick up HIV through their dicks. This is because:

- taking away the delicate, easily damaged foreskin removes one way HIV gets into the body
- men with no foreskin are less likely to pick up sexually transmitted infections (STIs make getting HIV easier).

Circumcision might protect straight men but most gay men get HIV through their arse, not their dick. Countless circumcised men (straight and gay) have become HIV positive.

TIP

‘Cut’ men need condoms just as much as ‘uncut’ men.

HIV and the law

There's one final risk of unprotected sex we all should know about. If someone gets HIV as a result they could have the other person prosecuted. But only if the person with HIV knew they had it and didn't tell the other person. There have been several court cases, some involving gay and bisexual men. People with HIV have been sent to prison. For more information and advice check out www.tht.org.uk/prosecutions or call THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200

TIP

You can avoid the risk of being prosecuted by always using a condom and/or telling people before sex that you have HIV.



More information

This booklet is brought to you by CHAPS, a Department of Health-funded partnership of community-based organisations. They carry out HIV prevention and sexual health promotion with gay and bisexual men in England and Wales. You can see who they are on the back of this booklet. They can help with any questions you have about HIV, safer sex, sexual health or living with HIV.

Here are some other places you can get information and help about HIV and sexual health:

THT Direct on 0845 12 21 200
(weekdays 10am–10pm, weekends midday until 6pm)
You can also email questions to info@tht.org.uk

www.chapsonline.org.uk/biology
(how HIV is passed on during sex)

www.thinkHIV.co.uk
(all you need to know about HIV tests and finding a testing centre/sexual health clinic)

www.chapsonline.org.uk/getiton
(using condoms and lube)

www.chapsonline.org.uk/whatnext
(help if you or a friend have recently tested HIV positive)

www.hardcell.org.uk
(facts about S&M and rough sex)

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