

IS IT TIME TO STOP TALKING ABOUT SAFER SEX?

WITH THE LATEST ADVANCES IN HIV PREVENTION, CAN WE NOW LOSE THE STIGMA SURROUNDING SEX WITHOUT CONDOMS? IN FACT, CAN WE DROP SAFE SEX TERMINOLOGY COMPLETELY? DANIEL FRYER LOOKS AT THE ISSUES.



How do you feel about unsafe sex and those that practice it? Does the term 'bareback' strike you with fear and incredulity that anyone does it? Or does it turn you on because it's a bit, y'know, 'risky'? Do you think condoms are still the safest way to have sex? Because, it might be time to think again.

Thanks to research into medication such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis - PrEP - and the advances in combination therapy, barebacking today can be considered a safe sex practice. Sadly, many still recoil in horror at the mere mention of it.

For over 30 years now, the 'safe sex with condoms' message has been preached from every pulpit. Sex, whilst still a pleasure, became both a health concern and a serious responsibility. It also became something to be feared and stigmatised. Gay men, especially, who engaged in sex without condoms were thought of as idiotic at best, and downright evil at worst.

But, studies have shown that HIV+ gay men on medication and with an undetectable viral load are statistically unlikely to infect anyone. And studies have also shown that people on PrEP are statistically unlikely to be infected.

So, is there any need for terms such as unsafe sex, or barebacking, at all?

"Bareback sex is just a name for sex without condoms," says GMFA chief executive Matthew Hodson. "Lots of people have bareback sex - including, most likely, your parents."

Only, they don't call it that. No one outside of the gay community really calls sex without condoms 'barebacking'. And, as Hodson points out, "heterosexuals are far more likely to have sex without condoms than gay men." Yet they don't suffer from the same sort of judgement.

"Within our community there is a rich seam of disapproval of other people's sex lives. You hear it in the stigmatisation of gay men living with HIV: that they deserved it, because



Safer sex in Boyz in the 1990s

they had the wrong type of sex, or sex with the wrong number of people," he says. "Similarly corrosive language is often used to describe PrEP."

You don't have to dig deep into any discussion of PrEP before you come across people who will dismiss it on the basis that it encourages irresponsible behaviour. But does it? Are people who have sex without condoms irresponsible?

After all, unless you are celibate, there is no such thing as safe sex.

Although condoms provide substantial protection, they are not perfect. A recent American study into gay and bisexual men given PrEP, however, found that not one person contracted HIV during the 32-month course of the study. PROUD, a similar study, this time conducted in the UK, published its results earlier this year. Although it wasn't as successful as its US counterpart, it is thought that at least one participant contracted HIV before the study began and that others contracted the virus through lack of adherence to the medication.

So, together, these studies suggest that, if you're on PrEP and you adhere to your regimen, then medication is just as safe as using condoms.

And, as for people who are already positive: if they know their condition, are on medication and have had an undetectable viral load for six months or more, then the risk of transmission is less than when wearing a condom.

In fact PARTNER, a 2014 study, didn't find a single case of HIV transmission in 16,400 occasions of sex between gay men and 28,000 between heterosexuals where the HIV+ partner had an undetectable viral load.

Typically, most new cases of HIV arrive when people have unprotected sex with partners who don't know their status, or who haven't been checked recently (if at all).

So, if your sexual partner is on combination therapy and has an undetectable viral load, the risk is minimal. If you are on PrEP, the risk is minimal. As minimal as sex with a condom. But, PrEP isn't a magic bullet.

"It isn't going to prevent all future HIV infections for one thing and, for another, many men just aren't interested in taking it," says Hodson.

At the moment PrEP isn't available on the NHS (although it's being pushed to make it so). It is available privately, but costs £400 a month or more. Plus, you have to take it daily and there may be side-effects. But, not everyone likes condoms.

People on medication today

aren't self-destructive or selfish. Far from it. They are simply making informed choices. But, that doesn't stop the judgement.

In a recent study, researchers at the University of Michigan found that sexually related risks were judged more harshly than other, comparable risks and that people were more likely to overestimate the likelihood of one compared to the other.

The study also showed that people who accidentally passed on an STI were judged more harshly than those who passed on another type of infection, such as bird flu. However, according to US statistics, you are more likely to be involved in a car accident than you are to contract HIV. Professor Corley, who led the study, puts this perception down to stigma. "We have decided that sex is something dangerous and to be feared," she says.

However, attitudes are changing. Phil Evelyn, a personal trainer at musclelondon.com, has been part of the PROUD study and on PrEP for over two-and-a-half years now. He believes that knowledge and education are improving understanding. "I've been open about PrEP since I was first prescribed it," he says. "Some people were inquisitive, but most were judgemental. I was slut shamed, accused of spreading diseases, called a 'Travolta Whore' and more. But, lately, attitudes have changed. Now, most people just want to know how you can get on it."

So, isn't it time to ditch the safe and unsafe sex terminology, drop the judgement and just go back to calling it what it is? Sex. Healthy and enjoyable, stigma free sex.

WHAT IS PrEP?

PrEP is a new way to reduce the risk of contracting HIV. It involves HIV-people taking a daily pill that combines two drugs commonly used to treat HIV. PrEP is different to PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis), which you take after you think you have put yourself at risk by having sex without a condom. If you are protected by PrEP, you should never need PEP.