

# Experts Fear a Risky Recipe: Viagra, Drugs and H.I.V. ✓

By DAVID TULLER

SAN FRANCISCO, Oct. 15 — Viagra has become popular with gay men here and in other cities, reflecting a trend that has begun to worry health care experts, who fear that it may foster the spread of H.I.V.

Many gay men, like many straight men, are using Viagra solely for its approved purpose — as a remedy for persistent erectile dysfunction. Some H.I.V. positive gay men take it because the infection itself or the antiviral drugs may have reduced their abilities to perform sexually.

But many gay Viagra users are treating it as a recreational drug and taking it along with Ecstasy and other illegal substances, according to surveys. And some H.I.V. educators now fear that this more casual use of Viagra could lead to an unfortunate side effect: an increase in unprotected anal intercourse.

“For a subset of gay men, it’s definitely found its way into the mix of party drugs,” said Dr. Ken Mayer, a professor of medicine at Brown University, a board member of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association and medical director of research at the Fenway Community Health Center in Boston. “And in a bathhouse or other setting where there’s an opportunity to have sex with multiple partners, to have a longer-lasting erection can be a prescription for H.I.V. transmission.”

In addition to concern about H.I.V., health professionals warn that Viagra can be harmful if used together with “poppers,” a nitrate-based liquid drug that many gay men inhale during sex to relax their bodies and heighten the sensation.

Both Viagra and nitrates, a category that includes prescription drugs for cardiovascular conditions as well as recreational varieties like poppers, cause blood vessels to dilate, and combining them can cause dizziness, stroke or heart attacks. Deaths have



Susan Spann for The New York Times



Rick Friedman for The New York Times

Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, left, and Dr. Ken Mayer are among the health professionals concerned that the casual use of Viagra can increase the rates of H.I.V. transmission.

been reported among Viagra users who were also taking nitrate-based medicines for heart conditions.

A recent survey by the San Francisco health department of more than 800 men visiting a clinic specializing in sexually transmitted diseases has highlighted the issue. Of the gay respondents, 32 percent said they had used Viagra in the past year, compared with just 7 percent of the heterosexuals, and many of the gay men indicated they had combined it with Ecstasy, methamphetamines, poppers and other recre-

ational drugs.

Moreover, the gay men who reported using Viagra also reported having had more recent sexual partners than gay men who did not use it, and they were more likely to have a current sexually transmitted disease. More than half the men had gotten Viagra from a friend rather than a doctor, and 30 percent of gay H.I.V.-negative Viagra users reported having had unprotected anal sex with H.I.V.-positive partners or men of unknown H.I.V. status, compared with just 15 percent of gay H.I.V.-negative men who

Fear of a side effect from the drug’s casual use: an increase in unsafe sex.

had not used Viagra.

A handful of other studies, including a British survey of 677 gay men in London, have identified similar trends. Dr. Jeffrey Klausner, director of sexually transmitted disease prevention at the San Francisco health department, said he was particularly concerned about those who combined Viagra with methamphetamine, or speed, which can amplify and prolong sexual desire but make erections difficult to have and maintain.

“Viagra can turn people with chemically induced erectile dysfunction into more effective transmitters of H.I.V. and other S.T.D.’s,” Dr. Klausner said.

He and others cautioned, however, that it was difficult to generalize about Viagra use among large groups of gay men from statistics garnered among specific populations, like men visiting an S.T.D. clinic.

It is also unclear whether Viagra use itself can lead to an increase in risky behavior, or whether those who tend to engage in risky behavior are simply more likely to take Viagra.

Some Viagra advocates say the drug may actually reduce H.I.V. transmission by making it easier for men to maintain erections while using condoms. And others say that focusing on recreational Viagra use among gay men smacks of prejudice.

“Straight men are using Viagra recreationally all the time,” said a 39-year-old San Francisco gay man who has taken the drug to counteract the effects of speed. “So in some ways the concern about gay men using

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2001

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it is implying that using Viagra to enhance gay sex is not as legitimate as using it to enhance straight sex."

Apart from H.I.V. transmission, experts on gay men's health are most concerned about the potential dangers of the combined use of Viagra and poppers. Like speed, poppers can make sustaining an erection difficult for some men.

Dr. Ron Falcon, a gay physician in St. Paul, said that one of his patients

had obtained a Viagra prescription from another doctor, inhaled poppers and suffered a stroke. The man experienced partial facial paralysis and has not recovered completely, Dr. Falcon said.

"He said he didn't even remember that he wasn't supposed to use poppers at the same time, and the next thing you know he was unconscious on the floor," Dr. Falcon said.

He estimated that a quarter of his gay male patients have asked for Viagra. He turns down most, except for the few who have serious erectile

dysfunction.

Yet many gay men, like many straight men, can obtain Viagra relatively easily through the Internet. Others receive it from friends. And some doctors are simply much less selective than Dr. Falcon in prescribing it.

Jim Hopkins, a 44-year-old journalist in San Francisco, said that two years ago he called his doctor to make an appointment to discuss Viagra. Mr. Hopkins, who lived in Kentucky at the time, hoped the medication would help him sustain an erection

during condom use.

The doctor prescribed it without seeing him or even talking to him. "I was surprised at how easy it was," Mr. Hopkins said. "There was no counseling, no warnings about poppers, nothing," he said.

Dr. Klausner of the San Francisco health department said he hoped his survey results would help persuade Pfizer, which makes Viagra, of the importance of creating educational campaigns for gay men and their doctors about the uses and abuses of the medication. He has suggested

that the company buy ads in gay magazines and produce informational materials specifically for doctors with a high proportion of gay men in their practices.

A Pfizer spokesman, Geoff Cook, said he did not know whether the company would pursue a gay-oriented educational campaign. He stressed, however, that Pfizer had long warned against the use of Viagra for nonapproved purposes, and that doctors had been informed about the dangers of combining it with both legal and illegal nitrates.

"Our position to not use Viagra for recreational purposes is well-known, but any pharmaceutical product can be abused," Mr. Cook said. He added that Pfizer also advised caution

when the drug was used with protease inhibitors, an important class of H.I.V. medications.

Protease inhibitors can sometimes amplify both Viagra's potency and its potentially troublesome side effects, which can include priapism, a condition of prolonged erection that can cause permanent damage, as well as headaches and heart-related complications.

Michelangelo Signorile, whose book "Life Outside" explored gay club life and sexual culture, said: "I don't think it's problematic for people to enhance their sex life any way they can. But people already have a lot of difficulty adhering to safer sex, even without Viagra in the picture."