

AIDS

Many Gay teenagers are still having unsafe sex

by Aras van Hertum

Many young Gay and bisexual men knowingly engage in unsafe sex, according to a new study.

Dr. Gary Remafedi at the University of Minnesota surveyed 239 Gay and bisexual men aged 13 to 21. His findings appeared in this month's issue of the journal *Pediatrics*.

He found they "often engaged in high-risk sex, despite good knowledge about HIV." The men "correctly recognized they were more likely than others to be infected, but were not deterred from dangerous behavior," he wrote.

The young men were highly knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, scoring an average of 91 percent on a standard AIDS Knowledge Questionnaire. But despite their knowledge, 63 percent had put themselves at "extreme risk" of HIV infection, either by having unprotected anal sex or by injecting drugs.

Remafedi said his findings show that AIDS prevention campaigns aimed at Gay and bisexual youth need to emphasize condom use during anal sex.

"Programs for Gay and bisexual youth should focus on preventing unprotected anal sex," he concluded. "Promoting alternatives to intercourse may be another promising approach to HIV prevention for Gay and bisexual youth."

Rea Carey, an advocate for Gay and bisexual youth, said she disagrees with Remafedi's conclusions. Carey, who coordinates the D.C.-based National Advocacy Coalition on Youth and Sexual Orientation, said AIDS prevention programs aimed at Gay and bisexual youth are unsuccessful because they focus primarily on sexual behavior.

"They know all the information, they're just not doing anything with it," she said. "What they don't know is how to feel good enough about themselves to put that information into practice."

"What we need to do is look at the broader context," she said. "For many young people, their first priority is not whether they're going to wear a condom. It's whether they're going to get through the day at school without being beaten up for being Gay."

A number of studies have found that many young Gay and bisexual men knowingly engage in unsafe sex, said Carey. What scientists need to do now, she said, is find out why they are ignoring AIDS prevention messages.

"Young Gay and bisexual men know a lot but aren't doing anything with it, and we need to ask why," she said.

In the study, the 239 men reported a total of 570 sexual encounters in the past year, including 53 heterosexual encounters. Of the 89 men who said they engaged in anal sex during the past year, just eight had consistently used condoms.

In fact, condoms were consistently used just 53 percent of the time during anal sex and six percent during oral sex. Thirty percent never used condoms during anal sex and 88 percent never used condoms during oral sex. The men discussed condom use with their partners



by Kristi K. Gasaway

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during 28 percent of the sexual encounters, and discussed HIV status during just six percent of the encounters.

Carey noted that the study found a high level of "fatalism" about HIV infection among young Gay and bisexual men. Among the men surveyed, 44 percent said it's likely they will contract HIV.

"It's a pretty depressing statistic," she said. "Young people are growing up expecting to be HIV-infected."

The study also revealed some of the experiences and problems that affect Gay and bisexual youth as they begin to explore their sexual identity.

On average, the youth began feeling same-sex attraction at age 11; started identifying themselves as Gay or bisexual at age 15; and had their first sexual experience — homosexual or heterosexual — at age 16. More than one-third of the youth had not come out as Gay or bisexual to one or both of their parents.

The study found that 59 percent had experienced problems in schools relating to their sexual orientation; 42 percent had been sexually abused or assaulted; 33 percent had run away from home; 30 percent had attempted suicide; 29 percent had been arrested by police; 15 percent had received substance abuse treatment; and 15 percent had been hospitalized for psychiatric treatment, most often for depression or attempted suicide.

AIDS prevention among Gay and bisexual youth was a topic of discussion at a conference in Dallas last month, attended by about 150 people, including interim AIDS "czar" Patsy Fleming.

The American Association of Physicians for Human Rights (AAPHR), which sponsored the event, said participants "heard alarming reports of high rates of new infections among Gay and bisexual men, especially youth and men of color."

Many of those who attended said AIDS prevention campaigns targeting Gay and bisexual men often fail to reach youth. They said young Gay and bisexual men "should have the authority and resources to design their own prevention strategies," reported AAPHR. ▼

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