



**“I feel that I’m finally fully
enjoying sex for the first time
in my life”**: The impact of PrEP on sexual
cultures from the SIN-PrEP study

Bridget Haire, 7 November 2017

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What does PrEP mean
for safe sex in Sydney?

Overview

- **Outline of this qualitative study**
- **Findings**
 - *Condomless sex*
 - *'New stigma'*
 - *Risk mitigation strategies*
 - *Sexually transmissible infections*
 - *HIV-related anxiety*
 - *Reciprocity and citizenship*
 - The condom question
 - Sexual negotiation in the PrEP age
 - Serostatus and identity
 - Sex and liberation

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What does PrEP mean for 'safe sex' in Sydney?

- Sydney-based **gay men taking PrEP** (through clinical trials OR personal importation)
- Sydney-based sexually active **HIV positive gay men**
- Sydney-based HIV sexually active **negative gay men**
- Australian-based **healthcare providers**
- Australian-based **HIV sector professionals** involved in PrEP policy and advocacy
- **Individuals are interviewed twice, about a year (9-18months) apart**
- **Recruitment of community participants:**
 - ACON 'Ending HIV' elist
 - Advertisements at Fairday and in the SSO
 - Purposive sampling of transmen and people who stopped PrEP

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Included in this analysis

43 interviews

5 health care providers

25 PrEP takers (4 importers, 4 Prelude, 17 Epic)

5 HIV negative men not on PrEP

2 HIV positive men not on PrEP

6 repeat interviews (5 PrEP users, 1 non-user – including 4 former importers now all on EPIC)

3 focus groups

12 community sector workers

1 health care provider

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The condom question

- Wide range of responses re condom history from 'just what you did' to something to avoid as much as possible through other risk reduction strategies (esp serosorting)
- Willingness to use condoms was related to personal pleasure and partner satisfaction
- Condoms had negative symbolic means for some men (HIV) and positive symbolic meaning for others (care and respect)
- Men taking PrEP all reported less condom use since uptake – in repeat interviews there is even less condom use than in initial ones

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I didn't start taking PrEP to be able to not use condoms. It's been quite a, quite a shift I suppose. I went on there as extra protection but then a few situations came up where I didn't use condoms for whatever reason and then I've gone, "Oh, oh, this, you know, I've kind of, kind of developed a taste for it." Teddie, 32

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Initially I didn't really have a problem having sex with condoms - it was just what you did - I guess I was coming across more casual partners who clearly had an aversion to using condoms. And also, despite all the stresses that I've already talked about that my partner at the time had around potentially infecting me, he absolutely despised condoms. Like it was a complete buzz-kill. Just, you know, any sort of sense of arousal would be gone almost instantly...I did at some point in the last few years start to develop a bit of an aversion to using condoms myself. David, 40

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Sexual negotiation

- Sexual negotiation has changed
- PrEP is only one factor in this – digital technology and treatment-as-prevention are other very significant factors
- Some (older) men champion all prevention options in negotiation
- Condom use is getting harder to negotiate, and some men are initiating PrEP to stay 'in the game' rather than due to their own desire for condomless sex
- *These days I'm seeing more and more people ...they feel like they are missing out because the guy on PrEP ends up not necessarily having sex with them because they don't want to use a condom – Sydney focus group*
- Men don't always have equal power in negotiation

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“What’s your name? Are you on PrEP?”

Marc 32.

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Negotiation

Basically, I really didn't know how to navigate conversations a lot or I just forgot about conversations in the moment. So this was something ... I like to think I'm pretty organised so for me being able to do something daily is a lot easier than one thing like when you're with somebody - Lance, 34

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Q: You were saying before that people have when they're using PrEP in their [online] profiles. And so do you do that in your own profile?

A: So I've got in mine, I've heard some people will be like take it off and like I will have like periods of having it on and then taking it off, and then putting it back on. You do find that, if you do have it on, they take that as like, "Oh, he's going to like be into like bare-back. Like no condoms." I like try to but like now being on PrEP, if they don't use a condom, I don't push too hard - Calvin, 19

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Yeah, I probably did notice that people were far more willing than I had anticipated to have unprotected sex without any kind of conversation about it, which I found a bit confronting, which was part of the reason that I kind of wanted to go back onto PrEP and was glad that I wasn't feeling sick because of it, because I just, yeah, it seems like people have a very casual attitude towards protection in the gay community now, much more so than when I was in my early twenties

Manacounda, 30

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PrEP use and HIV+ serostatus

- For men under 30, direct contact with someone with HIV – especially a friend seroconverting – had a big impact.
- Some didn't know if they'd ever had sex with a person with HIV
- Some, but not all, were very aware of undetectable viral load being 'safe' for HIV transmission (but some wanted PrEP in addition, including those in long term relationships with HIV+ men)
- PrEP was often discussed as something that reduced the difference between HIV+ and HIV- men, especially in the older men

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PrEPsters and HIVers

Prior to PrEP, asking someone are they undetectable when you highly suspect that they're HIV positive would be considered, you know, that's really intrusive and rude. You would just, you know, use a condom. But, you know, if you say, you know, if you're in that sort of same sort of situation now, instead of actually having to sort of say something really kind of rude because if someone has been HIV positive for a while it might have a little bit of lipo or something like that and, of course, saying, you know, "Are you HIV positive?" is kind of like making, you know, a comment on how they look. [Yep] So, instead of having to do all that sort of stuff, you can sort of say something like, "I'm on PrEP. Are you undetectable?" Gordon, 50

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Sexual liberation through PrEP

PrEP use as relieving anxiety was an extremely common theme

For me...sex has always been riddled with guilt and anxiety, and fear. It's just, it's just the way it's always been from, from when I was, you know, 17 to all the way up until like when we started on PrEP a year ago.

Marc, 32

For me it just kind of, it feels like I'm a little bit freer and, as someone with a lot of anxiety, that is a, you know, a good thing. And, yeah, it's, it's helped me to sort of open up, sexually. So like I've, I've certainly become far more confident, sexually, since I've been on PrEP than I was prior to it – Manacounda, 30

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Sex and meaning

[Sex is] something that brings pleasure and enjoyment, and makes me feel happy, and I consider it kind of important on one level recreation, on another level way of connecting with people. Jack, 40

[Sex has] become my social activity...it's the way I connect. *And one of the things I love about Scruff is I talk to people who I would never talk to, that I would never cross paths with, who are interesting, nice, intelligent, smart, generous chaps who like to fuck slightly older men. Steve, 53*

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Yeah, sex is, most, for the most part, is about kind of intimacy for me rather than just sort of sexual satisfaction if you like. And that kind of intimacy is actually very important to me...when I think about kind of things that get me, things that I go after or encounters that I seek out or try and pursue myself, it's about a sense that this is gonna be kind of interesting or intimate, or kind of lovely, actually, if that makes sense. Yeah, yeah. So that kind of sex is very important to me. I love it. It's totally great. I'd put it, I'd put it, put it at the centre of my kind of queer politics and ethics, to be honest. Liam, 37

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It also has to be defining and mean something in more than just, you know, something physically pleasurable. It has to have other contextual meaning to it too. So it's just like playing, playing music for, you know, you know, four hours at a time. It has to, it's not just notes and making a sound: it has to have, you know, meaning for you. So the same goes for sex, you know. It's like a, it's kind of like playing a musical instrument. It's the same thing, you know.

What kind of meanings does [sex] have for you?

So it's who I am as in identity.

It has connectivity in intimacy - connectedness. Gordon, 50

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Conclusions

- Gay male sex cultures are changing, with PrEP one of many factors influencing this.
- PrEP did not precipitate condomless sex in this group, but it has enabled gay men to talk about it openly
- For some men, condoms were laden with negative symbolic meanings, and PrEP offers a liberation from these meanings.
- For other men, dislike of condoms is simply about sensation.
- Norms of sexual negotiation are in flux, and this could be a problem for those with lesser ability to negotiate.
- Sex is a key expression of identity and human connection for many men in this study

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Thank you

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