

Experiences of, and resistance to, disclosing positive HIV status to potential sex partners

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Background:

Rejection of people living with HIV (PLHIV) by sexual partners has been comprehensively documented (de Wit et al. 2015). Recent research also found only a minority of HIV-negative gay men on pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) were comfortable with condomless sex with HIV-positive partners (even if partners had an undetectable viral load [UVL]) (Holt et al. 2018). To date, little research has been undertaken on how PLHIV anticipate and negotiate expectations and outcomes related to disclosure in sexual contexts.

Methods:

Data were collected as part of an ongoing qualitative cohort study of 34 PLHIV diagnosed from 2016 onward in Australia. Drawing on in-depth interviews conducted between January 2019 and November 2021, we analysed participants' experiences of disclosure and non-disclosure of HIV status to (potential) sex partners.

Results:

The median age was 32.5 years; with the majority (32/34; 94%) male, and 91% identifying as gay or bisexual. Participants' accounts revealed several strategies related to disclosing HIV status, based on context and familiarity, and also 'risks' of negative outcomes. Many participants had experienced rejection by potential partners due to their HIV status (despite having UVL and/or potential partners being on PrEP). Participants' accounts also revealed ambivalence around disclosure, with UVL and changes to legal framings drawn on to challenge expectations that PLHIV should disclose their HIV status in sexual settings (especially on hook-up apps). Participants also provided insights into their own attitudes and expectations *prior* to their diagnosis, with many reporting they'd been uncomfortable with the idea of sex with HIV-positive partners, and that their knowledge of UVL and treatment as prevention had been limited.

Conclusion:

Non-disclosure can be read as both a practical response to other risks associated with sex for PLHIV (i.e. exposure, judgement, and the possibility of rejection), *and* as active resistance (Green, 2021) to expectations of disclosure in sexual settings.

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