

# “I FEEL LIKE SHACKLES HAVE BEEN LOOSENED A LITTLE”: THE IMPACT OF PREP ON GAY MEN’S SEXUAL CULTURES

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## **Background:**

By the end of 2017, more than 14,000 gay and bisexual cisgender and transgender men (GBM) were accessing HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) in Australia. This study explores the culture of PrEP adoption and evolving concepts of ‘safe sex’.

## **Methods:**

Between September 2015 and May 2018, in-depth interviews were conducted with 24 sexually active GBM using PrEP and 7 sexually active GBM not using PrEP. Twelve participants completed a follow-up interview 9–18 months later. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data were analysed thematically.

## **Results:**

Some PrEP users reported sporadic or non-existent condom use prior to PrEP access, and most reported reducing condom use following PrEP uptake. Many participants associated condoms with HIV-related anxiety and loss of pleasure, however some associated condoms with expressions of mutual care. HIV-negative men not on PrEP reported increasing difficulty in negotiating sex with condoms. Three PrEP users had ceased use by the follow-up interview. Cessation due to side effects provoked anxiety about renewed HIV acquisition risk. Positive impacts of PrEP included reduced HIV-related anxiety and improved sexual negotiation. Negative impacts included concerns about sexually transmissible infections and perceived loss of sexual capital by those who wanted to continue condom use.

## **Conclusion:**

Many participants reported irregular or infrequent condom use prior to PrEP initiation, which declined further after adoption. However, this is not a concern for HIV transmission in a high adherence context. Reduction in HIV-related anxiety suggests a mental health benefit for PrEP users. Of concern are reports of normative pressure on non-PrEP users to adopt PrEP. While PrEP has made HIV prevention easier for many, findings suggest that the sex culture has not yet shifted to an inclusive ‘combination prevention’ approach. Paradoxically, maximising the benefits of PrEP may require further support for those who opt to continue condom use.

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