

Gay, bisexual men who have social anxiety tend to engage in risky sex

December 1 2009

A Ryerson University HIV researcher has found a link between social anxiety and unsafe sexual activities among gay and bisexual men, some of whom are HIV-positive.

Dr. Trevor Hart, director of the [HIV Prevention](#) Lab at Ryerson University, says that his early findings from a four-year study indicate that [men](#) who are afraid of being judged in social situations are more likely to engage in unprotected sex with other males. Even more alarming, he found that the higher the level of [social anxiety](#), the greater the chances of HIV-positive men taking part in unsafe sex.

"We suspect that socially anxious men who are HIV-positive are concerned that if they insisted on condom use, their partners may not want to have sex with them. It may also force these men to talk about their HIV status," says Dr. Hart. "In an age where there is still a lot of stigma against people living with HIV, it is understandable that HIV-positive men might have concerns about being judged about their HIV status."

During the study, the Sexual Health and Attitudes Research Project (SHARP), the psychology professor and his research team interviewed 300 men, 18 years and older, from the Greater Toronto Area. These men were asked about social anxiety they may have experienced, [psychological distress](#), negative childhood experiences such as being abused by others and their sexual behaviour.

In addition to the SHARP study, Dr. Hart presented several research projects in November at conferences in Toronto and in New York City. One of the research findings presented found that among young adults living in Pune, India, those who were less confident in urging their partners to use a condom were more likely to have had risky sex in the past six months.

Whether Dr. Hart's studies are on HIV-positive men or adults living in India, his common goal is HIV prevention.

"Our research is increasingly moving in the direction of creating and evaluating counselling interventions that can reduce the spread of HIV among higher risk populations," says Dr. Hart.

A five-year Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) New Investigator Salary Award in HIV Research is enabling Dr. Hart and his 12-member research team to focus their attention on three key areas:

- * Identifying risk factors in [unprotected sex](#) among adolescents and adults who are at risk of contracting or transmitting HIV;
- * Examining the link between physical health and psychological outcomes among people living with HIV;
- * Testing behavioural interventions to promote sexual health and to reduce sexual risk outcomes among people at high risk of contracting HIV and people living with HIV.

Other research projects underway include examining factors that influence HIV-positive women's decision about whether or not to become pregnant and [HIV](#) transmission among youth with disabilities. Dr. Hart and his research team is also exploring what makes high risk groups engage in harmful sexual behaviour, such as homeless youth and youth who have with a history in the youth justice system.

The findings from Dr. Hart's SHARP study, funded by the CIHR, are expected to be published within the next two years.

Provided by Ryerson University

Citation: Gay, bisexual men who have social anxiety tend to engage in risky sex (2009, December 1) retrieved 5 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-12-gay-bisexual-men-social-anxiety.html>

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