

Love matters: Internet hookups for men don't always mean unsafe sex

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If a gay or bisexual man seeks sex or dating online, the type of partner or relationship he wants is a good indicator of whether he'll engage in safe sex, a new study suggests.

Gay men seeking long-term romance online are more likely to engage in [safe sex](#) than men who want a sexual encounter only, the study shows. This is valuable information because it helps [HIV-prevention](#) counselors design more effective sexual health interventions, says Jose Bauermeister, assistant professor at the University of Michigan School of Public Health and director of the Sexuality and Health Research Lab.

June marks the 30th anniversary of the discovery of the pneumonia-like illness that later emerged as HIV/AIDS.

Bauermeister says that [dating sites](#) for [gay men](#) are no longer reserved only for sexual hookups and that many sites today exist for men who also seek love, intimacy and long-term romance. Unfortunately, even today the assumption is that gay men use the Internet solely to find [sex](#), and that HIV-prevention counselors don't talk with clients about love and relationships, he says.

A pair of papers from Bauermeister's research group are among the first to identify and look at four categories of online dating, ranging from hookups only to long-term romance, and the risk behavior associated with each category.

"The takeaway here is just because I go online doesn't mean I'm engaging in risk," Bauermeister said. "It's what kind of partner I'm looking for (that matters), so for HIV prevention purposes if I were going to try to develop an intervention, I need to take that into account."

Much of the literature about online dating looks at the sex-only encounter, which is "predictably unsafe," Bauermeister says. Not much research exists about the other categories of online dating and how they associate with [risk behavior](#).

In one study, men who reported seeking hookups only engaged in more [unprotected sex](#) than men who reported only looking for romance online.

"It's interesting because as a test counselor if you have five or 10 minutes, you need to talk about how to include conversations about love," Bauermeister said. "If you aren't hooking up very often and looking for Mr. Right, you may be engaging in very particular behaviors that decrease your risk of HIV."

"The bigger question is should we include components about romantic relationships into HIV prevention. Those components are not usually included now."

A second paper looks at different dimensions of love, passion, intimacy and commitment to see if different configurations of love could be correlated to different risk behaviors. Young men who think about their future and their [love](#) in the future are less likely to engage in risky sex in the present, Bauermeister says.

"This is important because counselors, rather than assuming young men only seek hookups, can make a point to discuss the role that romance plays in their lives," Bauermeister said. "For counselors testing for HIV, one of the ways to decrease the risk is by reducing the number of

partners. One of the ways to do this is emphasize relationships in HIV prevention."

More information:

"Mr. Right and Mr. Right Now: Romantic and Casual Partner-Seeking Online Among Young Men Who Have Sex with Men"

www.springerlink.com/content/p7002605105037h2

"Romantic Ideation, Partner-Seeking, and HIV Risk Among Young Gay and Bisexual Men" www.springerlink.com/content/671r68487g435364

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