Medical Xpress

New study tests the effectiveness of at-home HIV testing for male couples

April 20 2016, by Laura Bailey

Relationships bring with them lots of issues: Who will do the laundry? The cooking? Pay the bills?

But gay and bisexual men also wrestle with how to handle HIV status and testing.

A new University of Michigan study trial is believed to be the first of its kind to use telemedicine via in-home testing and video counseling to help male couples manage HIV-related issues. Called Project Nexus, the goal is to test the effectiveness of in-home testing and counseling to improve the lives of gay couples.

Robert Stephenson, professor of health behavior and biological sciences and co-director of the U-M Center for Sexuality and Health Disparities (SexLab), based in the schools of Nursing and Public health, is the principal investigator.

There's a pressing need to increase testing and communication about HIV risk among male couples, Stephenson said. Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men are the only group in the United States experiencing an increase of HIV infections.

Recent studies show that as many as two thirds of new infections among gay men come from main partners. Further, gay men in relationships perceive themselves to be at less risk of HIV, and test less frequently for HIV than single men, despite frequently not using condoms, Stephenson said.

Nexus hopes to recruit 350 male couples nationwide to pilot the program—175 couples of unknown or self-reported negative HIV status and 175 couples where one partner is already living with HIV and the other partner is not.

Couples where one person has HIV and the other doesn't (called serodiscordant) have different needs when trying to manage HIV in their relationships, Stephenson said.

"Because of this, we need to understand whether or not Nexus works differently among serodiscordant couples than among couples who are both HIV negative or of unknown HIV status," he said.

If effective, the program will be offered to HIV/AIDS service organizations and health departments around the country.

Provided by University of Michigan

Citation: New study tests the effectiveness of at-home HIV testing for male couples (2016, April 20) retrieved 19 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-04-effectiveness-at-home-hiv-male-couples.html

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