

## EXPLORE Baseline Papers Summary

Since the discovery that HIV is a sexually transmitted infection, many research studies have been conducted involving populations of men who have sex with men (MSM) to identify interventions which can help MSM to reduce the frequency of sexual behaviors that put them at risk of getting HIV. Extensive changes in risk behaviors have occurred among MSM but, in recent years, HIV infections, other sexually transmitted diseases and sexual risk behaviors have been increasing, emphasizing the critical need for identifying effective prevention interventions. The EXPLORE study is the first randomized trial conducted among men who have sex with men (MSM) in the United States designed to directly test whether a behavioral intervention can prevent HIV infection.

From January 1999 to February 2001, 4,295 HIV-negative MSM were enrolled in six US cities: Boston, Chicago, Denver, New York, San Francisco and Seattle. Men were eligible if they were age 16 or older and reported having engaged in anal sex with one or more men during the past year. Study participants completed extensive questionnaires regarding sexual behaviors, alcohol and drug use, and occurrence of sexually transmitted diseases. The articles published in the American Journal of Public Health this June summarize the data from the questionnaires completed when the men enrolled in the study.

Here are some of the findings from the paper entitled “High risk behaviors among men who have sex with men in six cities in the United States: Baseline data from the EXPLORE Study”.

Sexual partners during the six months before enrolling:

- Half of the study participants reported having sex with seven or more men partners.
- 42 percent reported having had 10 or more male partners.
- 78 percent of men reported having partners from whom they did not know the HIV status of the partner.

Sexual acts during the six months before enrolling:

- 45 percent of the men reported engaging in unprotected receptive oral sex with ejaculation.
- 48 percent reported engaging in unprotected receptive anal sex.
- 55 percent reported engaging in unprotected insertive anal sex.
- One-fifth of the men reported engaging in all three behaviors.

Alcohol and drug use during the six months before enrolling:

- 26 percent of the men reported drinking alcohol at least three days per week, and 11 percent were heavy drinkers (i.e., they drank at least four drinks per day or drank at least six drinks per occasion).
- Marijuana was the noninjection drug most likely to be used (46 percent of men), followed by poppers (amyl nitrates) (37 percent); hallucinogens, including ecstasy (24 percent); cocaine (19 percent); and amphetamines (13 percent).
- Ten percent of the men reported recent injection drug use.

Men who used drugs or alcohol were more likely to have reported having unprotected sex. Men with multiple partners of who were HIV positive or whose HIV status was unknown reported just as much unprotected anal sex as were men with only one primary partner. One-quarter of men with multiple HIV-positive partners reported unprotected receptive anal sex.

Interventions targeted at MSM need to directly address use of alcohol and drugs, relationships and known or perceived HIV status of partners. Of particular concern is the high proportion of participants who reported drug use and engaging in unprotected receptive anal sex with partners who are positive or of unknown HIV infection status - the sexual behavior with the highest risk. The baseline data, in conjunction with information on the ongoing resurgence of STDs, increased HIV incidence rates, and changes in risk behaviors among MSM in many US cities, emphasize the continued need for effective behavioral strategies designed to prevent HIV infection among MSM.

Here are some of the findings from the paper entitled “An individually tailored intervention for prevention of HIV infection: Baseline data from the EXPLORE Study.”.

- MSM who have poor communication skills and feel unable to protect themselves against HIV infection are more likely to report engaging in risky behaviors like unprotected anal sex.
- Noninjection drug use and enjoyment of unprotected receptive anal sex have the strongest association with reported risky sexual behavior, but ‘account for’ the risky behavior in only 33% of the men in the study.

Perhaps the most important finding is the great heterogeneity – i.e., many different combinations of attitudes, beliefs, and behavioral factors - that appears to be linked to risky sex among men in EXPLORE. The wide variety in risk-related behaviors suggests that one-on-one counseling, specially tailored to the particular behaviors practiced by each man, might be useful in preventing new HIV infections.

In a few months when the study is complete and the data are analyzed, we will know whether the EXPLORE intervention is useful in preventing HIV infections in the U.S. MSM population.