

World AIDS Day, 1 December 2010



COUNT ME IN.



How the gay community can act to tackle HIV

SUMMARY

Despite progress in recent years, gay men in the UK continue to become infected with HIV. GMFA remains committed to tackling the spread of the virus and this paper outlines how we all, as gay men and as part of the gay community, can re-commit to the fight against HIV.

The drivers of HIV infection

Knowledge about HIV and the role that condoms can play in stopping transmission are key to any prevention strategy. As such, GMFA wants to ensure all gay men have the information they need to protect themselves and their partners from the virus.

However, knowledge is not enough. **We must also address the factors that contribute to the further spread of HIV and the barriers to effective and consistent condom use.** GMFA believes that three of the primary drivers of HIV infection among gay men in the UK are:

1. The stereotyping of gay men with HIV and the taking of risks based on those stereotypes;
2. Men not knowing their own HIV status because of a lack of regular testing;
3. The influence of poor mental and emotional wellbeing on choices relating to sexual behaviour.

It is these three factors that inhibit men from using condoms consistently and taking responsibility for their sexual health and behaviour.

The 'Count me in' approach

The gay community is broad and diverse. The main drivers of HIV infection may be simple to describe but the way that they pervade gay men's lives and

thinking is involved and complex. If we as a community are serious about stopping the spread of HIV in gay men, we must be serious about tackling these complex and difficult issues.

This World AIDS Day, GMFA's 'Count Me In' campaign is asking other organisations concerned with gay men's health, the gay media, and community leaders to join us in committing to tackle these issues head on. The work will not be easy or straightforward, and some messages may be difficult to hear. However, if we want a change in the health of our community, this is the road we must travel.

The campaign is asking gay men to join this campaign and commit to stop the spread of HIV by agreeing to this five-point action plan:

1. I will know my HIV status
2. I will not assume I know someone else's HIV status
3. I will take personal responsibility for using condoms
4. I will value myself and my health
5. I will stay informed about HIV and how it's spread

If every gay man in the UK commits to each of these, we can significantly reduce the spread of HIV in our community.

GMFA's goal for the 'Count Me In' campaign is to move towards a point where we all, as gay men, are confident and empowered to take responsibility for our own health, where we are supportive of each other and we can openly discuss issues such as HIV status and safer sex without fear or stigma, and where the barriers to effective condom use are overcome. By working together to achieve this, we can prevent new infections and make a real difference to the wellbeing of our community.

THE DRIVERS

The stereotyping of gay men with HIV and the taking of risks based on those stereotypes

- Many of the old stereotypes about positive men simply aren't true. It's increasingly rare that someone will show visible signs of having HIV.
- If men believe these stereotypes, and therefore the stereotype that any healthy-looking man is HIV-negative, they run the risk of making false assumptions about the HIV status of the person they have sex with or fall in love with. They may then choose to have unprotected sex based on a false belief that there is no risk of HIV transmission.
- Stereotyping may be based on factors other than the existence (or absence) of visible symptoms of infection. All too often men make assumptions about the HIV status of their partners based on age, clothing, the clubs and bars they choose to go to or the kind of sex that they have.
- This is all the more risky when assumptions replace any kind of discussion or communication around safer sex. Both partners have equal responsibility for safer sex, yet stereotyping can deter both HIV-negative and HIV-positive men from discussing it.
- Some HIV-negative men may not feel the need to mention status or safer sex because a partner doesn't fit a false stereotype, while some HIV-positive men may choose not to disclose for fear of rejection. Someone with HIV might also wrongly assume that their partner is also positive.
- Most men, whatever their HIV status, do not discuss HIV before having sex with casual partners: 51% of positive men and 58% of negative men never ask about their partner's HIV statusⁱ.
- The reality is that, regardless of status, reliance on guesswork and luck is a risky strategy. Around ¾ of HIV-negative men expect HIV-positive men to disclose their statusⁱⁱ. Yet, only 1 in 5 HIV-positive men will always tell their casual partners they have the virusⁱⁱⁱ.

Men not knowing their HIV status because of lack of regular testing

- HPA figures from 2008 suggest there are over 32,000 gay men in the UK living with HIV. This is likely to be higher in 2010. However, over a quarter of these men remain undiagnosed, meaning they are unaware of their infection.
- Almost 1/3 of gay men have never tested (32.9%)^{iv}.
- Of the men who had never tested, 15% have had receptive anal sex without a condom in the last year with someone whose HIV status they

didn't know, or knew to be different to their own. Therefore, there can be no presumption that these men are definitely HIV negative or that they have no reason to get tested^v.

- Around 60% of men with undiagnosed infection believe that they are HIV-negative^{vi}.
- If men don't get tested, they may take risks based on the false belief they are HIV-negative and further spread the virus.
- If men know their HIV status, they can make informed decisions about their health, the sex they have and their future.
- If someone has HIV and is diagnosed early, they can start treatment before HIV seriously damages their immune system. This makes it more likely they'll live longer and enjoy better health. If they remain undiagnosed and therefore not on treatment, they are likely to be more infectious and therefore more likely to pass the virus on if they have unprotected sex.
- About a third of gay men with HIV believe they were infected during sex with a regular partner^{vii}. By knowing their HIV status, men are better informed to protect themselves and their partners.

The influence of poor mental and emotional wellbeing on choices relating to sexual behaviour

- Nearly all of gay men agree that HIV is a serious medical condition^{viii}. Some men become infected not because they think HIV isn't serious but because they have other difficulties in their life.
- Depression, low self-esteem and a lack of control can lead to decisions whereby men do not protect themselves every time.
- In particular, research shows that men with higher self-confidence are more likely to stick to safer sex. Also, lower self-esteem can lead to men putting themselves at risk, as can a wish for intimacy or just desire in the heat of the moment.
- Poor mental health has been seen to be a major factor in increasing sexual risk-taking. This might be following bereavement or the breakdown of a relationship or during a period of unemployment. Such periods of depression may also result in sex addiction and increased use of alcohol and recreational drugs, which are also linked to risky sex^{ix}.
- Campaigns must focus on giving men the skills to improve their self-confidence, their self-esteem and their ability to stay in control of the sex they have.

HOW WE CAN AFFECT CHANGE

- **Health promotion campaigns** should focus on tackling the factors that contribute to the further spread of HIV and removing the barriers to effective and consistent condom use.
- **GMFA** will continue to tackle these issues with long term, multi-stranded, coherent programmes of work. Our programme to tackle HIV stereotyping is already underway with work on a major literature review of all the known data on how HIV stereotyping and stigma is causing the onward spread of HIV and how we can best tackle it.
- **The gay media** is an influential opinion former in the gay community. As such, gay publications have a crucial role to play and can help raise

awareness and understanding of these important issues among gay men and how they contribute to the spread of HIV in our community.

- **Commercial gay venues** can play a major role in delivering information to their customers. In particular, they can join the campaign by helping to raise awareness of the issues, through one-off events, and the distribution of condoms and health promotion resources around World AIDS Day 2010 and throughout the year.
- **Gay men**, as individuals, can join this campaign and commit to stop the spread of HIV by agreeing to the five-point action plan.

ABOUT GMFA

Founded in 1992, GMFA is the UK's leading charity dedicated to gay men's health. Its mission is to improve gay men's health by increasing the control they have over their own lives. The organisation is based on the belief that the best health promotion for gay men comes from gay men themselves. For this reason, it uses the knowledge and ideas of its 170 volunteers, most of them gay men, to design and plan its thought-provoking sexual health interventions. These include a range of advertising campaigns, leaflets, postcards and booklets; FS,

its health magazine, distributed nationally in gay venues and GU clinics; and national and London-based courses covering sex education, life skills and smoking cessation. In addition, GMFA creates targeted sexual health interventions for black gay men and HIV positive gay men. Independent surveys have concluded that GMFA's campaigns reach up to 60% of the London gay population and that the organisation is the most reliable agency at reaching gay men.

The charity's website at www.gmfa.org.uk includes a range of accessible information for gay men:

- Sex & Sexual Health, www.gmfa.org.uk/sex – visited by a third of London's gay men in 2006;
- London Services, www.gmfa.org.uk/londonservices – detailed listing of sexual health services for gay men in London;
- Positive Gay Guide, www.gmfa.org.uk/positive – information for HIV positive gay men;
- The Guide, www.gmfa.org.uk/theguide – a guide to gay sports and social groups in London;
- Quit smoking, www.gmfa.org.uk/quitsmoking – information and advice on quitting smoking for gay men;
- About GMFA, www.gmfa.org.uk/aboutgmfa – for more information on GMFA.

GMFA projects are developed by positive and negative volunteers. To volunteer or donate, go to www.gmfa.org.uk or call 020 7738 6872. Charity no. 1076854.



References

- ⁱ Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2006: Sigma Research
- ⁱⁱ Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2006: Sigma Research
- ⁱⁱⁱ Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2007: Sigma Research
- ^{iv} Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2007: Sigma Research
- ^v Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2007: Sigma Research
- ^{vi} Sexual Health Survey of Gay Men, London 2006: UCL
- ^{vii} Factors associated with HIV seroconversion in gay men in England at

the start of the 21st century, 2007: Macdonald N et al.

^{viii} 97.8 per cent of gay men agreed with the statement 'HIV is still a very serious medical condition' – Gay Men's Sex Survey, 2006: Sigma Research

^{ix} Risky sexual behaviour in context: qualitative results from an investigation into risk factors for seroconversion among gay men who test for HIV: Macdonald N et al.