

HIV

A GAY MAN'S GUIDE

HIV – A GAY MAN’S GUIDE

This guide contains basic facts about HIV, the virus which can cause AIDS. It explains how the virus makes people ill, how it is passed on and how it can be avoided. The guide also answers many FAQs about the HIV test.

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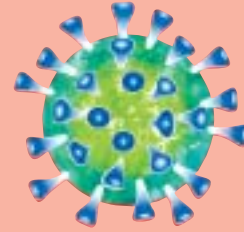
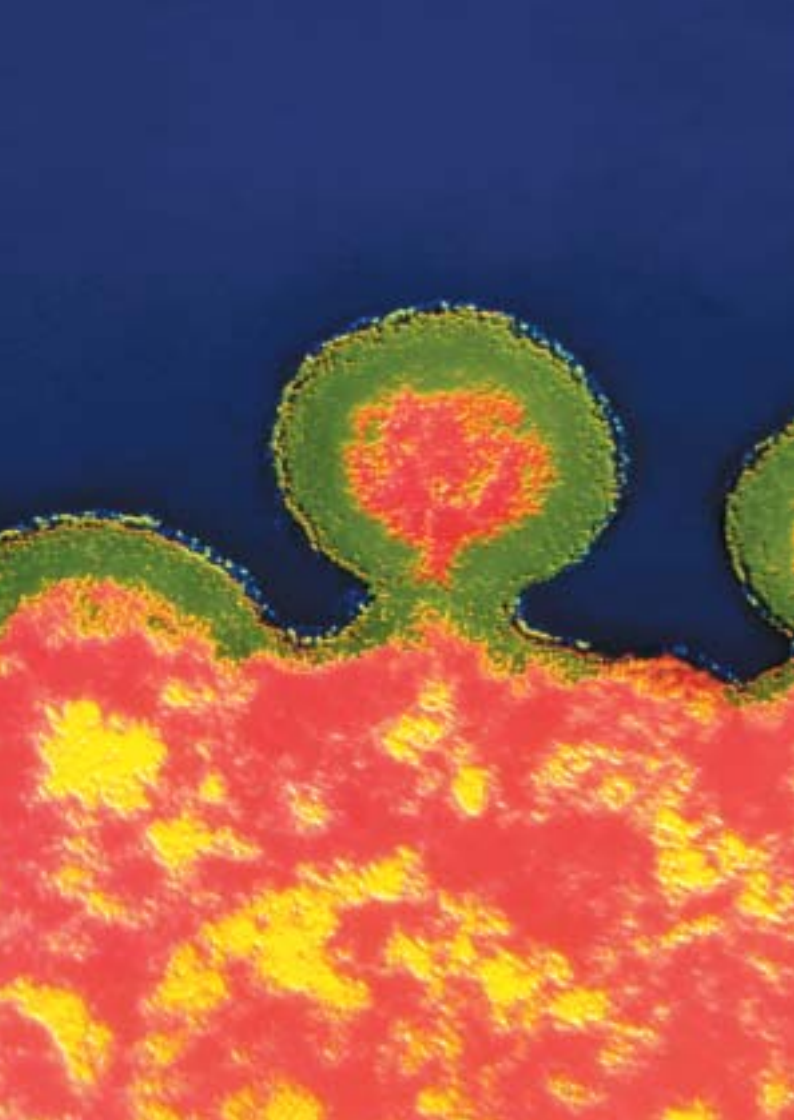
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pages: 6-7, 20, 26-27, 30, & cover
Design: Vertigo Design Consultants

Camden Health Promotion Service is contracted by all the health authorities in London to be their publisher of HIV sexual health booklets for gay men for the London Gay Men's HIV Prevention Partnership.

Distributed free in London by

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HIV

THE BASICS

HIV is a virus which can cause an incurable and life-threatening condition called AIDS.

In the past 20 years, 9,500 gay or bisexual men in Britain have died from AIDS. Most were aged between 20 and 50.

There is no cure for HIV infection, but new drugs offer real hope for HIV-positive people.

Thanks to new drug treatments, the number of gay or bisexual men dying from AIDS in the UK each year fell from 1,094 in 1995 to 185 in 2000, a drop of 83%. The number of HIV-positive gay men who develop AIDS each year in Britain has shown a similar decline.

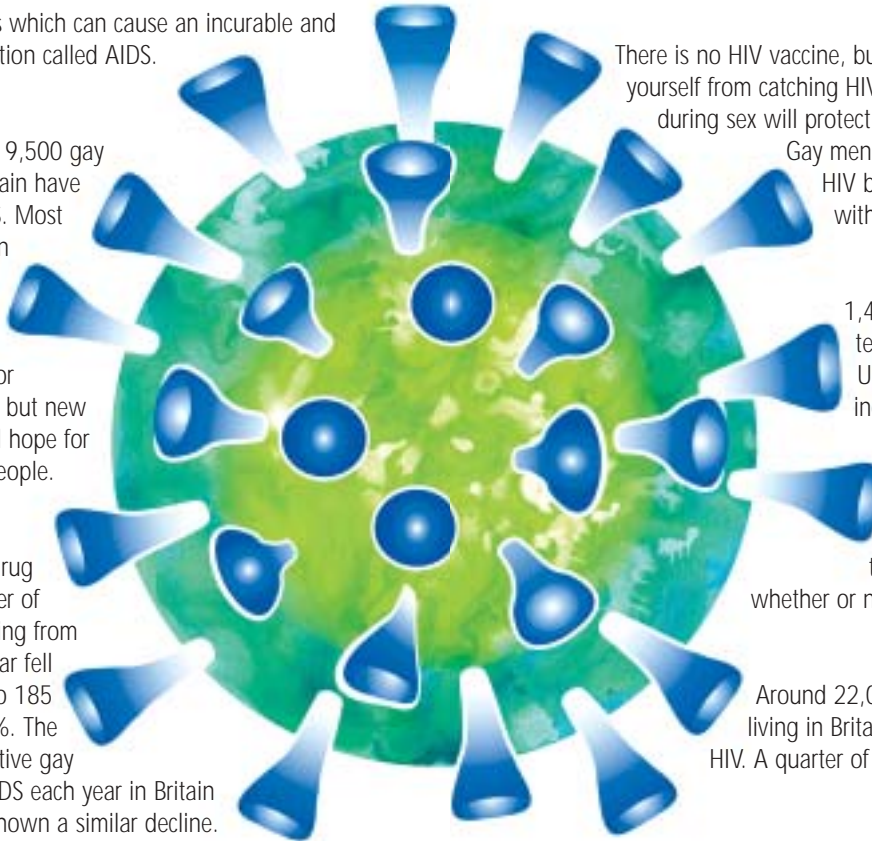
There is no HIV vaccine, but you can protect yourself from catching HIV. Using condoms during sex will protect you from catching HIV.

Gay men are most likely to catch HIV by having anal sex without using a condom.

1,429 gay and bisexual men tested positive for HIV in the UK in 2000, the first annual increase in new diagnoses since 1996.

There is a simple, free test which can tell you whether or not you have got HIV.

Around 22,000 gay or bisexual men living in Britain today are infected with HIV. A quarter of them don't even know it.



What is HIV?

HIV is a virus which can cause an incurable and life-threatening medical condition called AIDS. HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. It is so called because it attacks the **immune system**, the body's defence against disease.

A person who has been infected with HIV is said to be **HIV-positive**. More than 40 million people worldwide are HIV-positive. In the UK, the number of HIV-positive people is more than 35,000, of whom around 20,000 are gay or bisexual men.



HIV in cross-section

Since 1991, the number of gay and bisexual men testing positive for HIV in the UK fell year on year – from 1,712 in 1991 to 1,321 in 1999, a decline of 23%. But figures for 2000 showed new infections starting to increase again, up more than 8% to 1,429.

There are two main types of HIV: HIV-1 and HIV-2. The most aggressive form of the virus is HIV-1, which is the type most commonly found in this country.

If untreated, HIV can cause so much damage that the immune system no longer works properly. When this happens, we say that a person has AIDS...

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**. Strictly speaking, AIDS is not a *disease* but a *condition* in which a person's immune system has become so weak that it can no longer fight off a whole range of diseases with which it would normally cope.

The illnesses which affect people with AIDS are often referred to as **opportunistic infections**, because HIV, by weakening the immune system, gives them the opportunity to take hold.

Some of the most common opportunistic infections which affect gay men these days are:

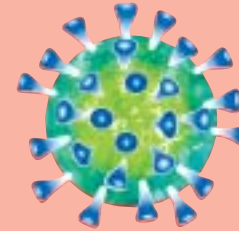
- **Pneumocystis carinii**, commonly known as **PCP**, a type of pneumonia or lung infection
- **Cytomegalovirus** or **CMV**, a virus which can cause blindness
- **Candidiasis** or **thrush**, a chronic fungal infection, usually (in men) of the mouth and throat
- **Shingles**, a painful outbreak of blisters on the head or body caused by the same virus which causes chicken pox
- **Tuberculosis** or **TB**, a bacterial infection which usually affects the lungs, lymph nodes and brain

HIV is a virus which can cause an incurable and life-threatening medical condition called AIDS.

- **Toxoplasmosis** or **toxoplasma**, a bacterial infection which can cause abscesses on the brain
- **Kaposi's sarcoma** or **KS**, a skin cancer

AIDS is now the world's fourth biggest cause of death; in Africa, it has overtaken malaria as the leading cause of death. In the past 20 years, 25 million people worldwide have died from AIDS, making it a bigger killer than the Black Death. In the UK, nearly 15,000 people, almost two-thirds of whom were gay or bisexual men, have died from AIDS.

However, new drug treatments have dramatically cut the death rate from AIDS. In Europe, the number of people who die from AIDS each year has fallen by over two-thirds in the past five years. Thanks to these drugs, the number of HIV-positive people who go on to develop AIDS has also shown a similar decline.



HIV

THE SCIENCE



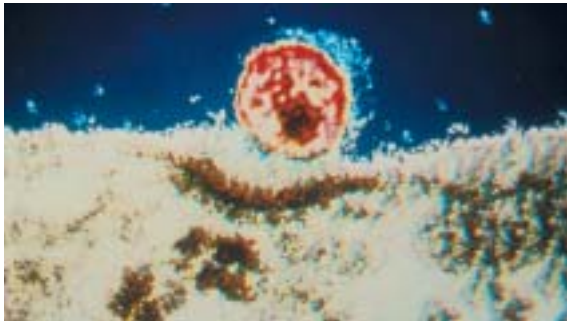
What is a virus?

A virus is a tiny organism which causes disease. The name virus comes from the Latin word for *poison*.

Viruses are incredibly tiny; so small that they can only be seen with a very powerful microscope. They are much smaller even than bacteria – which cause diseases such as syphilis, cholera and tetanus – and, unlike bacteria, viruses are *not* killed by antibiotics.

A virus is a tiny organism which causes disease.

In order to reproduce, viruses need to find a host. Once a virus gets inside a suitable host – an animal, a plant or a human being, depending on the type of virus – it can begin to make copies of itself. As it does so, it damages its host, causing the host to become ill.



HIV penetrating a cell in the body's immune system

In humans, viruses are responsible for many diseases, including the common cold, flu, warts, cold sores, hepatitis, various cancers (such as cervical cancer) and AIDS.

How do people catch viruses?

Most viruses can be picked up simply by being breathed in. The virus that causes the common cold is an example (actually, we should say viruses, as there are more than 100 cold viruses). The cold viruses are very robust and can survive quite easily on their own, drifting in the air until they find a suitable host.

Once the cold virus is breathed in by someone, they become infected – they get a cold. And every time someone who has a cold sneezes, they blast the virus into the air, where it hangs around until it is breathed in by other people nearby.

HIV cannot survive for long outside the body.

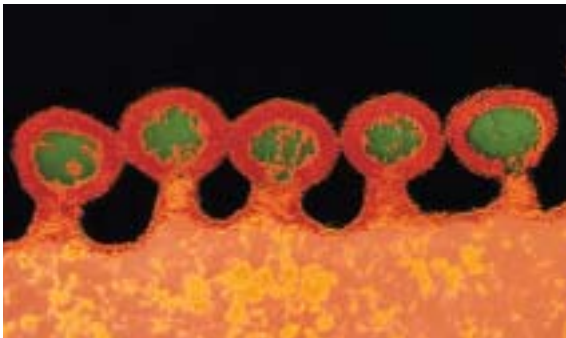
HIV, however, is more delicate – and much more difficult to catch. It cannot survive for long outside a person's body; HIV can only survive in bodily fluids, such as blood, semen (cum) or saliva. And it can only be passed on if the bodily fluids from an infected person get into another person's bloodstream.

How do viruses cause illness?

Viruses reproduce by invading the cells which make up the body of their host. Cells are the building blocks of life. Like bricks in a wall, they join together to make up every part of a living being. So the body is made up of skin cells, muscle cells, nerve cells, bone cells, brain cells, blood cells, and so on.

Cells multiply by dividing – they simply split in half to make two new cells. Which is handy. Every day, cells get damaged or they simply wear out and need to be replaced. The human body is a bit like a factory, churning out new cells all the time – millions upon millions every second of every day.

Viruses hijack cells, using them to make copies of themselves. When these new copies of the virus break out of the host cell – a process known as **budding** – they damage and usually destroy it.



HIV budding from a cell in the body's immune system

What's so special about HIV?

HIV is very difficult to catch. It cannot be picked up by touch or by being breathed in; you have to get much more intimate than that. In fact, HIV is most commonly passed on by sexual intercourse.

HIV is also sometimes referred to as a **lentivirus**, or *slow virus*. This is because, although HIV reproduces very rapidly, it takes a long time – many years, in most cases – before it causes so much damage that a person gets ill.

The immune system is your body's defence against disease.

HIV is different from the majority of other viruses in that it specialises in attacking the very cells which are designed to get rid of it. That is why HIV is such a dangerous virus – it attacks the body's **immune system**.

What is the immune system?

The immune system is a beautiful and highly complex thing – it is your body's defence against disease. When you are infected with something that causes disease – such as a virus – your immune system starts to fight the infection.

How does the immune system fight disease?

With the help of special cells which float around your body in your bloodstream.

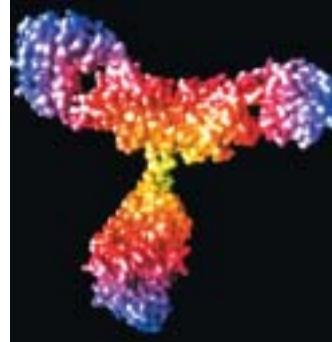
There are two main types of blood cell – red blood cells, which carry oxygen around the body, and **white blood cells**, which make up your immune system. The white blood cells track down and destroy any viruses floating free in your bloodstream. They also destroy any cells which have already become infected with a virus.

The first thing the immune system does is try to prevent an invading virus from entering the bloodstream and spreading around the body. Suppose you cut yourself and a virus gets into the wound. Your immune system will immediately swing into action. Immune cells will rush to the wound and start devouring the virus. In many cases, that is the end of the story – the invader will be utterly destroyed.

But if a large enough quantity of the virus gets into your wound, some may get round the first line of defence and escape into your bloodstream. That's when the second line of defence comes into play.

Once a virus has been identified by the immune system, your body starts to produce a special kind of protein known as an **antibody**. Antibodies stick to viruses, smothering them and stopping them infecting cells. Antibodies also attract "killer" immune cells to come and destroy the virus.

Some of the antibodies remain in your bloodstream even after the virus has been fought off, so that if you are infected by the same virus again, they will immediately get hold of it and destroy it before it has a chance to start reproducing.



An antibody

Antibodies will only attack the virus they were designed to combat. Antibodies produced to fight, say, the chicken pox virus will not attack HIV. So if you are infected by a virus you have not caught before, your immune system will have to start from scratch, producing antibodies to deal with the new enemy.

It can take the body a few days, weeks or even months to manufacture the antibodies to fight an infection. This gives the virus a breathing space in which to multiply and make you ill. But if the antibodies are already there, from a previous infection, the virus can be overwhelmed before it has a chance to reproduce. Once you have had, say, chicken pox, you shouldn't get it again. Your body has a "memory" of chicken pox (the chicken pox antibodies), and it "remembers" how to defeat it. Or, to put it another way, you are now **immune** to chicken pox.

Can I become immune to HIV?

No. Because of the way HIV damages the immune system, the body is unable to get rid of the virus and build its defences against future infections, in the way

it can when dealing with other viruses. The only way to develop immunity to HIV would be by means of a **vaccine**, which could be used to protect HIV-negative people against the virus. A vaccine would not help anyone already infected with HIV.

What is a vaccine?

It is a medicine which can prevent a person from becoming ill if they are infected with a virus. When you are vaccinated, the doctors use a special form of the virus, which has been modified so that it is unable to reproduce and is, therefore, harmless. But it *looks* dangerous to your immune system, which sets about producing antibodies to destroy it. So if you do later become infected with the real thing, those antibodies are ready and waiting and you won't get ill.

The word vaccination comes from the Latin word for *cow*. The very first vaccination was made by Edward Jenner in 1796. He noticed that milkmaids who had caught cowpox (an unpleasant but not fatal illness) from milking diseased cows, did not tend to get smallpox, a very serious and usually fatal illness. So he infected his young son with cowpox. Then, some days later, he infected him with smallpox. Edward Junior did not develop the deadly disease. Mr Jenner, using methods that today would land him in jail for child abuse, had, without fully understanding it, discovered the principle of vaccination.

We now know that the cowpox virus and the smallpox virus are so similar that the body's immune system thinks they are the same. Thanks to Edward Jenner and the widespread use of his vaccination technique, smallpox was eradicated worldwide in 1977.

Unfortunately, some viruses are able to **mutate** – to change their appearance – so that the immune system is fooled. The viruses which cause the common cold can adapt in this way. That's why you keep getting colds every year.

Is there an HIV vaccine?

Not yet. There are several potential vaccines undergoing extensive trials at the moment. But even if they prove to be of benefit, it will be some years before they are widely available.

It may be that there will never be one HIV vaccine. Because there is more than one type of HIV and

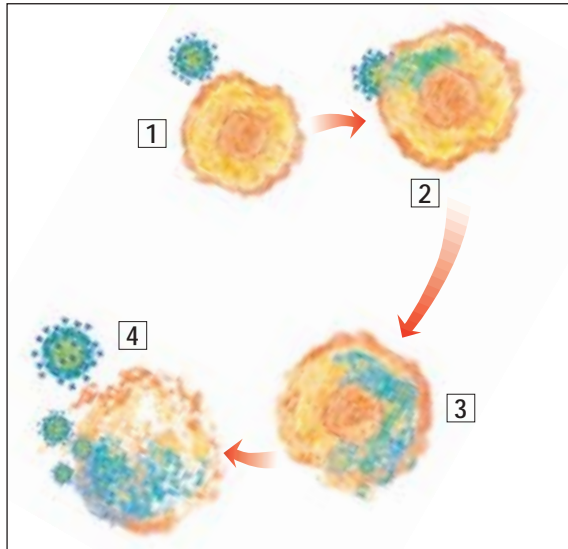


Electron microscope image of an experimental HIV vaccine

because the virus mutates, it may be that there will need to be more than one HIV vaccine – just as there is more than one flu vaccine.

How does HIV weaken the immune system?

HIV infects a particular type of white blood cell known as a **Helper T cell** (or CD4 cell). Helper T cells co-ordinate the body's immune response to an infection. They identify the source of infection and stimulate the production of antibodies.



How HIV reproduces: 1) the virus latches on to a Helper T cell; 2) the virus penetrates the cell; 3) the virus turns the cell into an HIV factory; 4) new copies of the virus break out of the destroyed cell.

By infecting and ultimately destroying Helper T cells, HIV seizes control of the body's immune system. Infected cells no longer behave as they should – instead of helping fight disease, they spread it. An infected T cell becomes an HIV factory, churning out copies of the virus. As the new viruses break out (or bud) from the cell, they weaken it and eventually destroy it.

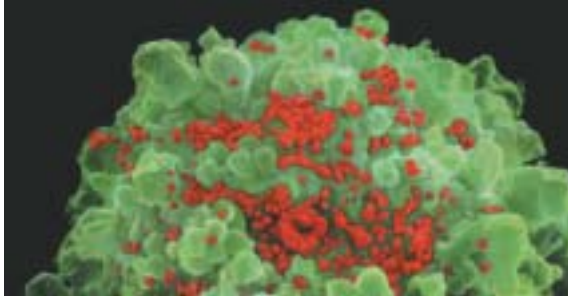
HIV seizes control of the body's immune system and starts to shut it down.

In effect, HIV progressively shuts down the body's immune response. Eventually, the immune system becomes so damaged that the body is unable to fight off not just HIV, but any other infection.

Why doesn't the virus just kill someone straight away?

The human body is not helpless in the face of HIV. In fact, when a person first becomes infected with HIV, their immune system puts up a tremendous fight against the virus. For a long time, the body is able to keep HIV in check, killing the virus as fast as it is able to reproduce itself. Ironically, this hyperactivity suits the virus down to the ground, because HIV reproduces most efficiently in active Helper T cells.

The immune system is so strong that it takes an average of ten years for HIV to wear it down to the point that it suffers irreparable damage.



A Helper T cell (green) infected with HIV (red)

The new anti-HIV drugs give the immune system the upper hand by slowing down the rate at which HIV reproduces. If you are HIV-positive, and you take these drugs, you could stay free of HIV-related illness for a lot longer than ten years.

Is there a cure for HIV?

No. Although the new drugs help to keep HIV under control, they do not completely get rid of the virus. Because there is no cure, once a person becomes infected with HIV, they stay infected with HIV for the rest of their lives.

There are several reasons for this:

- **HIV is able to hide.** When HIV infects a Helper T cell, it inserts its own genetic material (the “recipe” for producing new copies of the virus) into the cell’s genetic material. Once a cell is infected, it stays infected.

But infected cells don’t necessarily start producing copies of the virus right away. HIV can lie dormant in an infected cell. So even if the body’s immune system destroys every infected cell which is actively churning out HIV, it will miss those cells where the virus is lying low, not recognising them as being infected.

Despite the immune system’s best efforts, then, the virus will still be able to emerge from hiding and start reproducing itself all over again. That’s why, if you are HIV-positive, you need to keep taking your medication.

**Once a person is infected with HIV,
they stay infected for life.**

- **HIV is able to change its appearance.** HIV reproduces itself very quickly, making billions of copies of itself every day. The process is, however, prone to error, leading to slight variations – or mutations – in the structure of the virus. HIV is also able to recombine: two individual viruses merge, then split into two, slightly different, versions of the virus. The antibodies which have been produced to tackle the original version of HIV will not recognise the new versions. It will be some time before the body starts to produce antibodies to deal with the mutant copies of the virus, by which time they will have infected

millions of cells. HIV is not unlike the many-headed hydra of Greek myth – you chop off one head but another pops up to take its place.



- **HIV can develop resistance to drugs.** HIV's ability to mutate also allows it, in certain circumstances, to develop resistance to the drugs which are used to fight it. This means that the drugs no longer stop the virus from reproducing. Fortunately, there are an increasing number of anti-HIV drugs around these days, so, if one drug stops working, it is often possible to substitute another.
- **HIV attacks the immune system.** As we've said before, HIV uses our own immune system against us. That is the main reason why it is so hard to fight.

How does the virus pass from one person to another?

When certain bodily fluids of an infected person get into the bloodstream of someone else.

If I have HIV, do all my bodily fluids contain the virus?

No. Some bodily fluids do not contain the virus, while others contain such low concentrations of it that they pose a relatively low risk of transmission. The bodily fluids which have the highest concentration of the virus are **semen** (or cum) and **blood**.

HIV is *not* found in urine (piss), faeces (shit), vomit or sweat. Tears and saliva (spit) can contain tiny traces of the virus, but there is no known case of anyone becoming infected with HIV by being spat or cried upon. The virus isn't passed on by kissing, either socially (on the lips) or sexually (with tongues). Nor need you have any fears about sharing someone's cup, towel or flannel – HIV *cannot* be passed on that way.

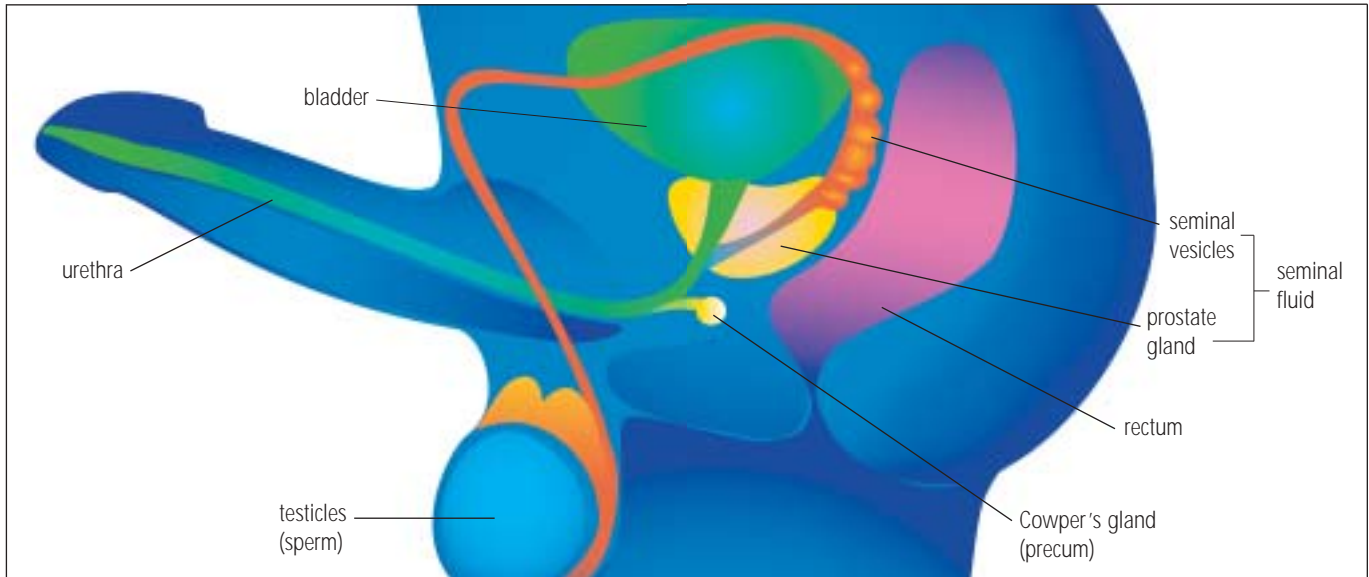
When a man has an orgasm and cums, he shoots semen, a milky white fluid, from his penis. Semen – commonly known as spunk or cum – is made up of a mixture of **seminal fluid** and **sperm**. Seminal fluid is produced by the seminal vesicles, which sit beside the bladder, and by the prostate gland, which lies beneath the bladder, while sperm is produced by the testicles (*aka* the balls or bollocks).

When a man is sexually excited, but before he cums, his penis may leak a small amount of clear fluid, which is thought to be the body's natural lubricant. This fluid (secreted by yet another part of the intricate and rococo male reproductive system, Cowper's gland, which is tucked away at the base of the penis) is commonly known as **precum**.

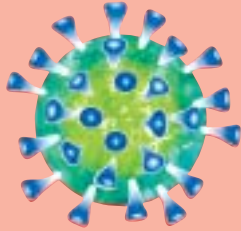
If you are HIV-positive, the virus will be found in your precum. That's why it is *not* safe for you to fuck another man without a condom, even if you pull out before you cum.

Spunk usually contains much larger quantities of the virus than precum. That's why, if an HIV-positive man cums inside another man, it is highly likely that he will pass the virus on to his partner. Most HIV-positive gay and bisexual men got the virus by being fucked without a condom.

You cannot get HIV by shaking hands, kissing or sharing someone's cup.



The male reproductive system



HIV

THE RISKS

So how do gay and bisexual men get HIV?

In the vast majority of cases, through unprotected sex. In a small number of cases, gay men have also contracted HIV by sharing needles to inject drugs. In descending order of importance, these, then, are the four main ways in which gay and bisexual men contract HIV:

- By being fucked without a condom
- By fucking someone without a condom
- By sucking someone off
- By sharing needles

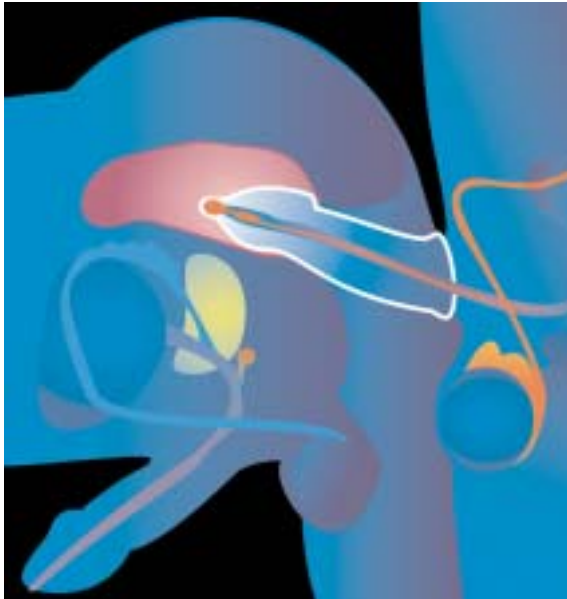
Why is it important to use condoms for fucking?

For gay and bisexual men, anal sex (or fucking) with someone who is HIV-positive is by far the commonest way to become infected with HIV. Well over 90% of HIV-positive gay men in Britain got the virus via anal intercourse. And the majority of them got it by being fucked without a condom.

When you are fucked, your partner's penis rubs against the lining of your arse (or **rectum**). The lining of the rectum is very thin and is designed to absorb fluid, which means that it is relatively easy for a virus like HIV to pass through it and into the bloodstream.

Being fucked without a condom is the most likely way for gay men to get HIV.

The lining of the rectum is also very delicate – it isn't protected with a covering of skin but only with a layer of mucus (like the lining of your throat) – and is easily damaged. A small abrasion or graze to the rectal lining will make it even easier for HIV to pass from the spunk (or precum) of an HIV-positive man into the bloodstream of the man he's fucking. And the arse is practically a home-from-home for HIV, as it contains a high concentration of the white blood cells which the virus targets.



A condom stops semen from being absorbed by the rectum and it protects the penis

Unprotected fucking is much less risky than being fucked, but low risk doesn't mean no risk.

If you use condoms while having sex, however, the virus cannot get into your body. Although HIV is very small, it cannot pass through latex. For more details about condoms and how to use them, see our free booklet *Condoms – Everything a Gay Man Needs to Know*, which is available in gay bars or by calling 020 7530 3992 for a copy.

Can you get HIV if you fuck other men but don't let them fuck you?

Yes, if you don't use condoms. Fucking *is* less risky than being fucked, but *lower* risk doesn't mean *no* risk. Fucking is only safe if you use condoms, whether you're giving it or taking it.

If a man is HIV-positive, the lining of his rectum may contain the virus; or his arse may bleed as a result of being fucked. In either case, if you fuck an HIV-positive man without a condom, you run the risk of absorbing the virus through your penis – either through tiny abrasions on the sensitive skin on the head of your penis, or through the urethra (the tube that both spunk and piss come out of – if you look at the slit at the end of your penis, you can see how delicate the tissue is; more like the lining of your mouth than the skin on the shaft of your penis). A condom will protect your penis and your health.

Can you get HIV if you don't use condoms but do use a lot of lube?

Yes, though you *may* be putting yourself at slightly less risk of getting the virus than if you use nothing at all.

Lubricants, such as those you might use with condoms, lessen the likelihood of either the penis or the lining of the arse being damaged during fucking. The more lube you use, the smoother the ride, the smaller the risk of damage. However, even if your penis or the lining of your arse don't get damaged, HIV can still be absorbed into your bloodstream if you have unprotected anal sex with someone who has HIV.

Even if using a lot of lube but no condoms is slightly less risky than using nothing at all, it is still a high-risk practice.



Do I need to use condoms if both my partner and I are HIV-positive?

If you abandon condoms, you put yourself at risk of being infected with a slightly different type of HIV from the one you already have. As we've said before, HIV mutates, producing new versions of itself. These new versions may be resistant to the drugs you are taking. They may also put an additional strain on your body's immune system.

If you are HIV-positive and only have sex with other HIV-positive men, you should also bear in mind that if you don't use condoms, you put yourself at greater risk of catching other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). People with HIV may find it more difficult to fight off an STI such as syphilis than HIV-negative people. There is also some evidence that HIV-positive people who get other STIs may be more susceptible to developing AIDS than other positive people.

Are you certain to get the virus if you have unprotected sex with an HIV-positive man?

No. Although unprotected anal sex is the easiest way to contract HIV, not every unprotected fuck where one of the partners is HIV-positive will pass the virus on. The reason for this is that there is a difference between being **exposed** to the virus and actually becoming **infected** with it.

So if you have unprotected sex with someone who is HIV-positive, do not assume that you have become

positive yourself. It is not properly understood why this may be so – it could be to do with the concentration of virus in the positive man's semen.

Not every unprotected fuck will pass on HIV...

The amount of virus that an HIV-positive man has in his cum and in his blood varies from time to time. These days, doctors can measure the amount of virus in a person's blood using a test called the **viral load** test. If your viral load is low – perhaps because the course of drugs you are taking has been successful in slowing down the rate at which the virus is able to replicate – that means that you have a low concentration of virus in your blood. However, this doesn't necessarily mean that the concentration of virus in your semen will also be low. In other words, a low viral load does *not* necessarily mean that you are *less* infectious.

Quite apart from that, if you are HIV-positive *and* you have another sexually transmitted infection (STI), such as gonorrhoea, syphilis, or non-specific urethritis (NSU), or if you have only recently become infected with HIV, then you may be especially infectious – that is to say, you may have high concentrations of HIV in your semen.

At the same time, if you are HIV-negative *and* you have a sexually transmitted infection other than HIV, such as herpes, for example, you may be more

receptive to catching HIV. It is thought that HIV-negative men who actively fuck without condoms are more at risk of picking up the virus from an HIV-positive partner if they have another STI.

The point is that neither of you will necessarily *know* whether the other is HIV-positive. Even if one of you is positive, neither of you will *know* how infectious he is. And even if you assume that he is *less* infectious, that doesn't mean he isn't infectious at *all*.

All that said, if, for whatever reason, you do have unprotected sex with someone who has HIV, then do not assume that you have become infected. Don't panic. Think about taking an HIV test. And keep using condoms.

Can you get HIV from sucking someone off?

Yes, but sucking is a lot less risky than unprotected anal intercourse (active or passive). The risk is even smaller if he doesn't cum in your mouth.

Even if he does, saliva contains substances which inhibit HIV infection. Besides, his cum won't hang around in your mouth – you're going to spit or swallow, aren't you? And if you swallow, your stomach acids will kill the virus.

... but it's not a risk worth taking.



But if your mouth is damaged in any way – if you have bleeding gums (perhaps you have an infection, such as gingivitis – in which case, see your dentist), a sore throat or a mouth ulcer (which can be a sign that you're run-down or about to go down with a cold) – then you should avoid sucking someone off. And if you've just had dental surgery, such as having a tooth removed, then don't even think about going down on someone until you're well and truly healed.

Sucking is a lot less risky than unprotected fucking

Recreational drugs can also cause problems. Rubbing cocaine on your gums, for instance, can damage them and make you more susceptible to infection. And some drugs – such as ecstasy – might make you chew the inside of your mouth, which is not the best preparation for giving someone a blow job.

Even if your mouth is in good order, don't brush your teeth or floss just before you give someone a blow job, as you could easily nick or scratch your gums. Mouthwashes are probably best avoided, too, as they may remove the substances in your mouth which can protect against HIV. If you want to freshen your breath before getting intimate, then try rubbing toothpaste on your teeth and gums. Or suck on a mint. Some men prefer to use condoms for oral sex. The choice is up to you.

Can you get HIV from being sucked off?

In practice, no. The saliva of an HIV-positive person contains very low concentrations of HIV.

What about other gay sexual practices?

Both **mutual masturbation** (wanking each other off) and **frottage** (rubbing your bodies together until you both cum) carry no risk of passing on HIV and are great ways of having sex, too.

Rimming – tonguing his arsehole – is almost certainly not risky as far as catching HIV is concerned.

If you use **sex toys**, such as dildoes and butt plugs, then use them with a condom if you plan to share them. If your boyfriend wants to use your dildo after you've used it, then remember to change the condom.

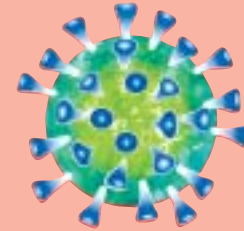
Even the so-called “heavier” types of sex play – **bondage**, **CP** (spanking), **TT** (tit torture) and **play piercing** (providing you sterilise the equipment between uses) – will not put you at risk of getting HIV.

Can you get HIV from injecting drugs?

Only if you use someone else's needle, in which you risk injecting yourself with someone else's blood. Injecting yourself with the blood of an HIV-positive person is a sure-fire way of contracting HIV. And this

is what can happen if injecting drug users, such as heroin or steroid users, share needles. That's why needle exchange schemes have been set up around the country, where users can get new, clean equipment. And that's why the percentage of injecting drug users in Britain who are HIV-positive is much lower than in the many other countries.

Only 3% of HIV-positive gay and bisexual men were exposed to the virus through shared needle use as well as through sex.



HIV

THE TEST

Will I know if I get infected?

Possibly. When someone first gets infected with HIV, they tend to develop flu-like symptoms – they feel feverish and ache all over. However, unless you *know* that you have been exposed to HIV, then you are not likely to associate feeling like you've got flu with being infected with HIV. You'll probably just think you've got flu. The only way you can know for sure whether or not you've been infected with HIV is by taking an HIV test.



Blood serum samples being tested for HIV antibodies
– the clear ones are negative, the orange ones are positive

Is there a test for HIV?

Yes. However, what is commonly called the HIV test is, in fact, a test for HIV antibodies.

HIV, as we've already mentioned, is a very small virus which is adept at hiding and changing its appearance. There *are* tests which can detect it in a person's blood, but they are complicated, time-consuming and expensive. It's much quicker and cheaper to test for the presence of antibodies to the virus.

It makes sense, too. If you have been infected with HIV, your body's immune system will start to produce antibodies to the virus, which will be found throughout your body. Antibodies don't hide and they're easy to identify.

Is the test confidential?

Yes. Completely. Provided you go to a sexual health clinic or HIV testing centre to take the test (for detailed listings of clinics in London, go to www.freedoms.org.uk; for national listings, see www.lovelife.uk.com).

If you go to your own GP first, there is a possibility that the fact that you have taken the test will become known. Not because your doctor won't keep your records confidential, but because there are certain circumstances when she or he may be asked about your medical record. If, say, you are applying for life

insurance (as part of a mortgage application, for instance), then the insurer may ask your permission to question your GP about your medical history. If you agree, they may ask your GP if you have taken an HIV test. If you went straight to a sexual health clinic, rather than arranging the test through your GP, however, then your GP would have no record of you taking a test.

**Nobody will know that you are HIV-positive
– unless they need to know**

Any sexual health clinic which tests you will not reveal your test result nor the fact that you have taken the test to anybody, except those people in the clinic who are directly involved in your treatment. Sexual health clinics also offer specialist counselling and support.

Will I have to pay to take the test?

No. All National Health Service sexual health clinics offer the test for free.

How accurate is the test?

Very. Your blood sample is split into two and each sample is tested using a different method. Both tests are more than 98 per cent accurate. Together, they leave almost no room for error.

I heard that there was no point in taking the test straight after having unprotected sex.

That's true. It takes the body's immune system a little while to start making antibodies to HIV. It can take up to three months after the initial infection before the body produces HIV antibodies. So, yes, there is no point in getting tested the day after you have been exposed to HIV.

But it may be advisable to go to your local sexual health clinic anyway. Some clinics offer a short-term course of anti-HIV drugs, which has the technical name **post-exposure prophylaxis** or **PEP**.

**If you think you may be positive,
the sooner you know,
the sooner you can do something about it.**

Some doctors believe that if someone is given PEP immediately after being infected with the virus (in practice, this means up to 48 hours after exposure), then it may be possible to eradicate it from their body.

What this means is that you will be given a month-long course of drugs, similar to those taken by HIV-positive people. It's not particularly pleasant – you will experience all the side-effects associated with these drugs and you will have to take them at regular, and often inconvenient, times.



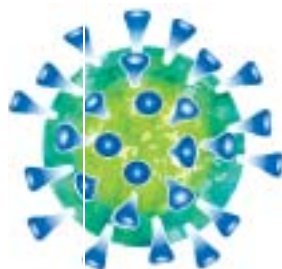
What should I think about before taking the test?

The most important thing to think about is how a positive result would affect you. Check out the website www.youchoose.org.uk and consider the following:

- **If I feel healthy, do I need to know if I'm positive?**

On balance, yes. If you have become infected with HIV, then the sooner you know, the sooner you can start to do something about it.

It may be that you need to start taking medication right away. One in five people who died from AIDS between 1998 and 2000 died within three months of being diagnosed as HIV-positive. In other words, they had put off taking the test for so long that by the time they discovered they were positive, it was too late. Their immune systems were so damaged that medication was unable to help them.



You're not on your own.

Even if you have put off having a test for a long time, it's best not to delay any further.

- **But HIV-positive people suffer prejudice and discrimination, don't they?**

Unfortunately, that is true. But it's not inevitable and it can be challenged. Telling someone – your mother, your lover, your best friend, your workmates – is a bit like coming out for a second time. It's scary and it can be upsetting for all concerned. But most people find that if they sit down and explain what being HIV-positive means, their nearest and dearest will offer their support and understanding.

In any case, you can control who you tell and how you tell them. The only people apart from you who will know you are HIV-positive are those people you *choose* to tell. A positive diagnosis is not tattooed on your forehead. The doctors, nurses and other health care professionals who will treat you are bound by a professional code of confidentiality. They will not tell anyone else.

You do not have to tell your employer that you are HIV-positive. Even if you do want to tell your boss, because your health has become affected to the extent that it harms your ability to do your job, the law, in the shape of the *Disability Discrimination Act*, does offer you some protection. Trade unions will also support any HIV-positive member who suffers discrimination at work and AIDS charity the Terrence Higgins Trust can give you legal advice (see the listings at the end of this booklet).

For doctors, nurses and other health care workers, deciding whether to tell your employer that you have taken an HIV test, particularly if the result is positive, has particular implications, so you should seek specialist advice. Your union will be able to help and you may want to read *Guidance for Clinical Health Care Workers*, available from the Department of Health website (www.doh.gov.uk).

Some life insurance and mortgage companies may ask if you are positive when you take out a

A negative HIV test result does *not* mean that you are immune to HIV

policy or decide to buy a house. But you should be able to avoid this. Many independent financial advisers will help you get life cover or apply for a mortgage without the need for you to answer any questions about HIV.

It's also up to you whether you tell your friends, family or lovers. If you always have sex with condoms, then you do not necessarily need to tell any new sexual partners that you are positive. The choice is yours.

- **I can't cope with the stress of waiting for a test result.**

That's understandable. But some clinics offer same-day testing, which means that you only have to wait a few hours between having the test and getting the result. You can find a list of clinics in London which offer same-day testing on the Freedoms website at www.freedoms.org.uk and in some of the booklets which are available free in gay venues.

If I am unlikely to be positive, should I waste my time by taking the test?

On balance, yes. And it's not a waste of time, either. If you are worried that there is a chance, however

small, that you have been infected with HIV, then a negative test result will put your mind at rest. And if the result does turn out to be positive, then at least you'll know – and you can start to deal with something real rather than with an imaginary fear.

Don't forget: you can take a friend with you when you go to be tested. That can help make the experience less stressful.

If you are thinking about taking an HIV test, why not get professional advice and counselling before you make your mind up? Organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust offer confidential advice and support on their National Helpline (020 7242 1010). You're not on your own.

What does the HIV test involve?

All you have to do is give a small blood sample. A nurse will use a hypodermic needle to take some blood from your arm. If you are squeamish – and a lot of us are, so it's nothing to be ashamed of – don't worry. It's all over in a minute, it hardly hurts (just a little prick), and nurses are used to people feeling a bit queasy and are skilled at making you feel comfortable.

The other crucial part of the HIV test is counselling. All clinics will insist that you receive counselling and advice before you even take the test, to make sure that you have thought it through. And when you get

your result, even if it's negative, you should be offered further counselling and support.

Once you've been counselled and have given blood, it's just a matter of waiting for the results...

If the test result is negative, does that mean that I have not been infected with HIV?

Yes, as long as you haven't had unprotected sex with an HIV-positive man in the three months before taking the test.

As we've already said, the HIV test detects the presence of antibodies to HIV in your blood. It can take up to three months after being infected with HIV before the body produces antibodies to the virus. This three-month period is known as the **window period** (you might also hear the term **sero-conversion** – someone who has sero-converted has started to produce antibodies to HIV).

Although some people start producing HIV antibodies within weeks of being infected, most clinics will suggest that you do not take an HIV test during the window period but that you come back for your test at a later date. This is so that if you get a negative result, you can be sure that you definitely do not have the virus.

If the test result is negative, does that mean that I can never catch HIV?

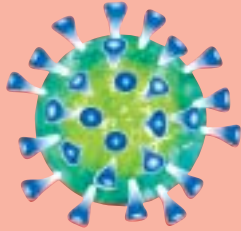
No. If your test result comes back negative, that doesn't mean that you can't become infected in future. A negative result does not mean that you are immune to HIV.

If the test result is positive, does that mean that my boyfriend has the virus, too?

Not necessarily. It depends on many things, including when you were infected and whether you and your boyfriend have been having protected sex with each other.

Because it is impossible to be sure either way, it is a good idea for him to take the HIV test. Even if he gets a positive result, too, that doesn't necessarily mean that you passed it on to him. This can be an emotional minefield, so make sure you get lots of advice and support, both as individuals and as a couple.





HIV

THE LISTINGS

Sexual Health Clinics

You can take an HIV test without telling your GP. Just ring up any Sexual Health Clinic and make an appointment. Some clinics offer same-day testing – you will get the result within a few hours of being tested. The Victoria Clinic for Sexual Health has a useful website for people who are thinking about taking the test. Go to www.youchoose.org.uk

For a full list of Sexual Health Clinics in London, along with details of which ones offer same-day testing, go to the Freedoms website at www.freedoms.org.uk or see the listings in our free booklet *Condoms – Everything a Gay Man Needs to Know* (available in gay bars or call 020 7530 3992 for a copy). For details of clinics in other parts of the country, see www.lovelife.uk.com.

Websites

There are numerous websites which offer detailed scientific information about HIV and AIDS. A good place to start is the **aidsmap** site at www.aidsmap.com, which also has links to other HIV-related sites.

There are also a lot of sites which offer detailed information for gay and bisexual men about safe sex, taking the HIV test and living with HIV. Check out **MetroMate** at www.metromate.org.uk and the **Terrence Higgins Trust (THT)** at www.tht.org.uk

Advice and Support

If you are thinking of taking an HIV test or if you just want more advice and information about HIV and AIDS, there are many organisations to help you. *Gay Times* magazine, available from most newsagents, contains comprehensive nationwide listings. The free pocket-sized listings guide *Need Help?* -- available free in most gay venues -- also contains detailed listings information.

The **Terrence Higgins Trust National Helpline** on **020 7242 1010** offers legal and financial advice as well as emotional support.

If you want one-to-one counselling with a professional counsellor, the **THT**, **PACE** and the **Healthy Gay Living Centre (HGLC)** will all be able to offer or recommend one. **London Friend**, the **East London Out Project**, **Blackliners** and the **Naz Project** can also offer counselling.

HGLC and PACE can offer counselling for gay couples. And specialist sexual health counsellors can be consulted at THT and PACE as well as in all sexual health clinics.

PACE, GMFA and HGLC run a wide range of very popular evening and weekend workshops and discussion groups for gay and bisexual men. Look out for ads in gay magazines or check out www.metromate.org.uk for details. And email or call to get your name on the waiting list.

Contact details

Blackliners

for black gay men
020 7738 7468/5274
www.blackliners.org

East London Out Project

56-60 Grove Road E17
020 8509 3898

Gay Men Fighting AIDS (GMFA)

Unit 43, Eurolink Centre
49 Effra Road SW2
020 7738 6872

Healthy Gay Living Centre (HGLC)

40 Borough High Street SE1
020 7407 3550

London Friend

020 7837 3337 (7.30pm-10pm)
www.friend.dircon.co.uk



Mainliners

for people affected by drug use, HIV and hepatitis
members.aol.com/linersmain/index.html

Naz Project

for Asian, Middle Eastern and North African men
020 8741 1879
www.naz.org.uk

PACE

(Project for Advocacy Counselling and Education)
34 Hartham Road N7
020 7700 1323
www.pacehealth.org.uk

Terrence Higgins Trust

52-54 Gray's Inn Road WC1
Helpline 020 7242 1010 (noon-10pm daily)
Sexual health counselling service 020 7835 1495
Living Well With HIV phonenumber 0845 947 0047
www.tht.org.uk

Condoms

You can buy condoms and lubricant in chemists, many supermarkets and in gay sex shops. For the widest range, gay shops and the internet are your best bet. For more details, see our booklet *Condoms – Everything A Gay Man Needs To Know* (available free in most gay venues or call 020 7530 3992 for a copy).

Freedoms (020 7530 3941) supplies free condoms and lube to gay bars, saunas and other venues in London. So if you find yourself out and about but out of condoms, Freedoms are there for you. Please don't take more packs than you need, as supplies are limited.

Freedoms also now sells boxes of condoms and lube at bargain prices. **box**⁵⁰ contains 50 Condomi Strong condoms with a 100ml bottle of Eros Bodyglide lube, while **box**²⁵ contains 25 condoms and a 30ml bottle of lube. The boxes are on sale in some gay shops and bars or via the Freedoms website (www.freedoms.org.uk).



clever box



Freedom's box²⁵

25 Condom Strong Condoms
30ml Eros Bodyglide Lube

Freedom's box⁵⁰

50 Condom Strong Condoms
100ml Eros Bodyglide Lube

Freedom's boxes contain the highest quality condoms and the most popular silicone based lube, and they are available at an exceptionally competitive price.

By purchasing your Freedom's box you are supporting the world's largest gay free condom scheme. Freedom's distribute nearly 1.5 million free condoms every year. Help support Freedom's and save money on your regular supply of condoms and lube.

For information on where
to buy Freedom's boxes

Freedom's boxes and free packs...
supporting your choice to use condoms



or call 0207 530 3941