

seven guys in long-term relationships who stick up strangers at the same time.

But whether young, old, poz, neg, top or bottom—everyone could recite the prevention pitch: Fucking without a condom can make a guy sick.

...you can get screwed .

You're right—barebacking isn't anything new. But its frequency dropped significantly during hard-hitting safe-sex campaigns of the 1980s and '90s. HIV and STD rates likewise fell.

Ask health officials about the country's sex life lately, and they'll tell you they're worried that queer boys are slipping into the same risky behaviors embraced by the stallions surveyed above. Not just because barebackers tell them so, but because they see it clearly reflected in stats that track what happens after a guy's dick and ass go south.

"You couldn't have a more dangerous behavior," explains Philip Knowlton, coordinator of the Men's Prevention and Wellness Program at Cascade AIDS Project. "All across the country, we're seeing HIV and rectal gonorrhea rates skyrocket, and those are direct indicators of unprotected anal sex."

The same shit is happening here in Portland.

The rate of positive HIV test results is up about 10 percent in Multnomah County, even though the number of tests performed has fallen during the past three years.

"Most people are not getting tested, and so they don't know their status. They may say that they're negative, but maybe they haven't been tested in four years and they've had all sorts of risky encounters," Knowlton says. "But because they don't have any symptoms or signs, they just assume."

Even more dramatic changes can be seen among other sexually transmitted diseases.

"After 15 years of steadily decreasing rates of STDs, gonorrhea and chlamydia began increasing in 1998," explains Margaret Lentell, STD program manager for Multnomah County. She says that from 1997 to 2001, chlamydia rates increased 21 percent and gonorrhea jumped 47 percent.

Now, all eyes are on a potential re-emergence of syphilis in Multnomah

County, one driven exclusively by unprotected sex.

After having remained fairly steady and near the national average during the past few years, the 22 local syphilis cases since last July already have surpassed the total for the previous 12 months. Incidents of syphilis among men who have sex with men have nearly doubled, accounting for half of the total.

"People think that HIV today is different than it was 20 years ago, and it's not. If anything, it's stronger."

—Philip Knowlton

"Syphilis rates are a predictor of HIV rates," Lentell warns. Syphilis sores open the door for HIV, and sexual behavior associated with acquiring syphilis also is associated with acquiring

HIV—namely anonymous partners from clubs, bathhouses, adult bookstores and barebacking parties.

"One of the guys who was diagnosed syphilis-positive was also HIV-positive. He had been to a bareback party and had sex with upward of 20 men when he was infected with syphilis but didn't know it," Knowlton explains. "Any of

What's a bareback party like?

It's orgy-mania. It's a chance to experience the baths of the '70s now. No questions of condoms or are you safe. Everyone's pre-screened by pic and referred by someone the host knows. I just bring my butt, my mouth, my dick and my drug of choice.

At the door, I'm met by a guy who requests that I take off all of my clothes, except my outfit. Sometimes, that's leather chaps, harness or just a jock.

The party's already going in several rooms. Pumpin' music, videos, towel-and-grease stations, drug-and-alcohol stations. The basement's dark, but I make out slings, rack and piss tub.

Everyone appears healthy, and I'd guess many are well educated, too. Naked, though, who knows who's got money, but the parking lot has both expensive cars and pieces of junk.

Sixty guys show up over 10 hours. Many are repeaters, but it's not some small circle of friends, either. Maybe one out of five is a first-timer.

Several are from Seattle. Some from other states. Some might be lovers off the leash for the night.

Most guys flip. It's tough to limit myself when so many are the trashy type I like to top, and so many are the hunky type I need to top me.

It's taken for granted that all are poz. As for STDs, who the fuck cares? I'm there for nasty monkey sex. If you need a condom, you shouldn't be there.

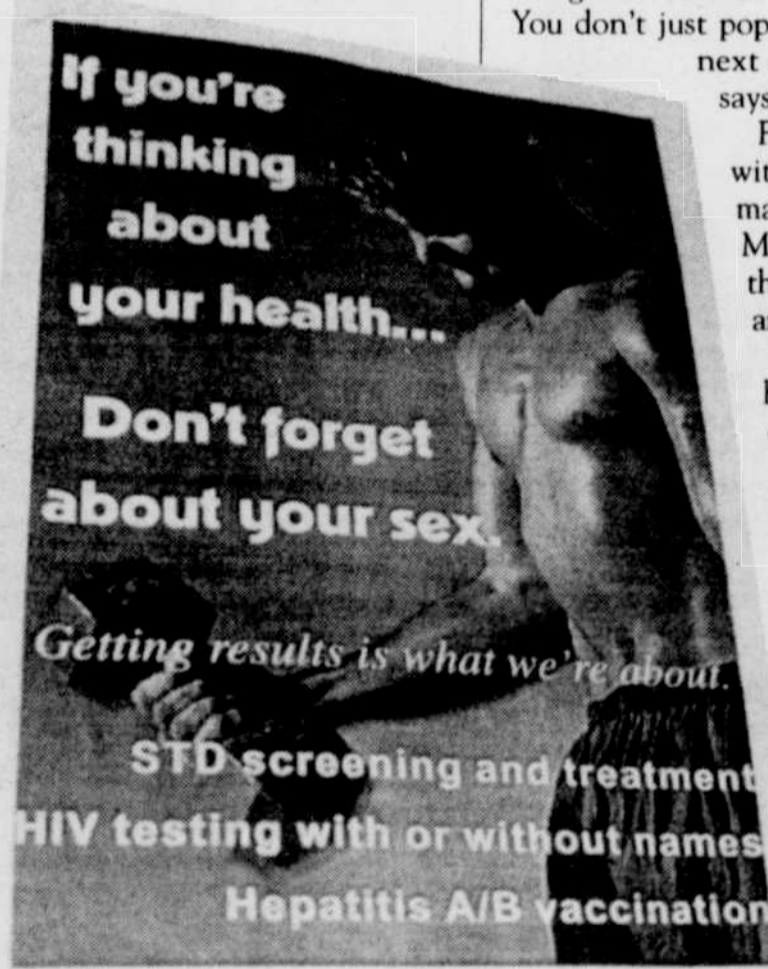
There are a lot of reasons not to bareback, so most guys don't. In my case, I'm simply immersing myself in the decadence that I've denied myself for many years. If you don't want to participate, don't. But leave me the fuck alone about my choice of entertainment between informed, consenting, adult men.

—MajorOne



Assume the position, assume the risk

If leaving the latex at home is causing a fuckin' near-epidemic, why are guys barebacking more than before?



MULTNOMAH COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT
420 SW Stark, 6th Floor, Downtown Portland
(503) 988.3700
YOUR PARTNERS IN HEALTH

Everyone's got their reasons, but health care workers bitch about three primary problems:

• **Mistaken miracle meds.** Today's drug regimens are a double-edged sword. No doubt, they extend the quality and quantity of life for many with HIV. But they also give the mistaken impression that STDs are easily managed and less than life-threatening.

"Images of HIV-positive people living life and climbing mountains look great in ads, but when you sit in our client room, you know that is not the truth. HIV is a debilitating disease that has horrible side effects. You don't just pop a pill and be off to your next circuit party," Knowlton says.

Five barebackers I spoke with believe today's meds make STDs no big deal. Maybe coincidence, but all of them were younger than 40, and four were HIV-negative.

"Nothing has made having sex without condoms safer in 2002 than it was in 1982," Knowlton offers. "There are medications out there, but you run the risk of becoming infected with a super drug-resistant virus, and then you're screwed from the get-go."

And just because you're HIV-positive doesn't mean you're off the hook. Case in point: Last September researchers documented a 38-year-old man who acquired a second strain of HIV through unprotected sex more than two years after he first was infected. So not only

Continued on Page 22