

different. Prevention staff are more likely to start by asking what you like to do in bed. Once they know the kinky shit you're into, they'll offer ideas for small changes you can make to reduce your chances of getting a sick prick.

It's not just fags

Anude tube isn't unique to homos. When asked by our Big Brother state health department if a condom was used the last time they fucked, a near exclusively straight 81 percent said no in 2000, up from 72 percent in 1996. Furthermore, in 1996, 57 percent of guys thought they had no chance of catching HIV; in 2000, 62 percent said as much.

But I'm in a monogamous relationship

Before condoms just disappear, both of you should test for HIV and STDs. Then test again in six months. If all test results are negative and if both of you are committed to a monogamous relationship, the consensus is that barebacking would pose little or no risk:

Get tested, get answers

Get more information by contacting Cascade AIDS Project at 503-223-5907 (www.cascadeaids.org) or the Multnomah County Health Department at 503-988-3700 (www.co.multnomah.or.us/health).

Sure, they'll encourage you at least to carry protection, but you also can choose from other noncondom strategies that, although far from safe, are at least a start:

- Instead of 10 partners this week, how about just two guys you know?
- Are you using plenty of lube?
- How about partying only Fridays, instead of all weekend?
- Pull out before you shoot your load.
- Bareback your boyfriend, but use a condom with everyone else.
- Take a piss and wash up after sex.
- Get tested and get treated.

Knowlton hopes this "harm reduction" model nudges guys along a continuum from higher to lower risk. "When they see it's an improvement in their life, maybe sometimes they'll ask to use a condom," he suggests.

At the same time, caseworkers look at other issues tied to this seemingly simple decision to shield our bodies from disease: drugs and alcohol, to be sure, but also self-esteem, coming out, acceptance, body image and more. Even just talking about sex can make us too shy, nervous or embarrassed to protect ourselves.

"As a society, we don't talk about sex," Lentell notes. "We don't see people on TV or in ads or in the movies negotiating safe sex and talking about how they're going to have sex. It's always the thrill of the moment. How do you say to your partner, 'I've got condoms; let's use them.'"

Because of this, Knowlton bets there aren't as many barebackers who seek out unprotected anal sex as there are guys who simply fall into an unspoken situation, no matter if it's an anonymous partner or a life partner. Some are

afraid of losing their lovers if they resist. Others simply trust their partner, thinking, "He'd tell me if he was positive" or "he'd say something if he was negative."

That's what many of my survey studs said, too.

Disclosure, it seems, is a sticky issue. Is it up to each individual to protect himself? Or do you have a duty to inform your partner? And who's to say that Mister Hottie Hunk

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you met online isn't just lying to you to have sex?

When trust is lacking, guys tend to make assumptions about status—and decisions about using condoms—based on what the guy looks like. Or the car he drives. Or what's in his medicine cabinet.

The question then becomes what does it look like to be safe?

This type of decision-making process is just the tip of the penis when it comes to "negotiating" for sex. Whether they bareback or not, all guys continually weigh risks involved, making

judgment calls about what they think is safe and what chances they're willing to take just to shoot their wad.

One of the most common barebacker claims of responsible risk-taking is limiting themselves to partners that are of the same "sero-status." Poz guys argue that it protects their HIV-negative brothers. Because of reinfection and mistrust, however, others thought this strategy didn't reduce their risk.

"The problem is that if you choose to have unprotected sex with somebody who is HIV-positive, you still run the risk of getting other STDs," Lentell says.

She spells out how tricky it is because syphilis symptoms might not be noticed for a long time. It's not called the "great pretender" for nothing. Left untreated, syphilis can lead to dementia, which literally causes you to be fuckin' crazy.

Getting it in the end

During the past decade or so, barebackers have found a collective voice. They want to reclaim their sexuality. Come what may, they want to make their own choices and let each man be responsible for himself.

"I understand that—and it's great, but if you're hurting other people, then what you're doing is wrong, and you need to stop," Knowlton says. "Sex without condoms is great, but it's hurting the community, and it's going to screw us in the end." □

TIMOTHY KRAUSE is a Portland free-lance writer who can be reached at timkra@millenicom.com.

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