

# Silence (Still) = Death

Why HIV remains a taboo subject for many gay men when they're hooking up—and how to break the silence

by Floyd Sklaver

It's 2 a.m. and Eddie is lying on his back, waiting to get fucked. The 36-year-old Portlander is HIV-positive. He doesn't know the HIV status of his top, and he doesn't ask. In fact, he doesn't care.

"I don't demand someone wear something," he says. "I just accept what comes along. It's me consciously saying whatever happens, happens. Life goes on."

HIV infections in Oregon are increasing at an alarming rate. During the past two years, there have been more than 170 new HIV infections (139 of them in the Portland metropolitan area). There are a number of theories about why this is happening—including a new generation coming of age who didn't witness the devastation AIDS wreaked in the 1990s, and an increase in the use of crystal metham-

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phetamine. But these theories do not explain the most alarming statistic, which is that 75 percent of these infections are occurring among men older than 30. In other words, men who lived through the first AIDS epidemic (and presumably should know better) are being infected three times more often.

In an effort to understand what is happening and, more importantly, to begin a conversation about HIV and sex among Oregon's gay men, I asked a number of sexually active men to talk candidly with me about dating and casual encounters. (Their names have been changed to protect their privacy.)

Regardless of the theories, one fact is certain: HIV rates are increasing because men are having more unprotected sex. At the same time, messages of safer sex simply aren't being heard. As Darien, a 52-year-old Portland salesman, put it: "The messages in bars are same old, same old. They are like the little things they give you on airplanes. Everybody's heard it, and nobody pays attention to it."

In the 1980s, "Silence = Death" was the rallying cry of the activist group ACT UP. The motto signified the need to speak out in order to get funds for treatment and prevention. Today, "Silence = Death" has taken on a whole new meaning. Failing to talk honestly with one another about HIV and AIDS means we have put ourselves at risk of individual illness and communitywide epidemic.

## The Sound of Silence

**W**hy aren't gay men talking about HIV? Why is it so difficult to have this straightforward and necessary conversation on our dates and in our casual encounters?

For starters, there is the fear of rejection.

Quite simply, gay men who are HIV-positive are afraid they will be rejected if they talk about it. As Eddie says: "I used to just put it out there, but nine out of 10 guys would say, 'Thanks, but no thanks.' It was a constant blow to my ego and so I don't do it anymore."

Nowhere is the prejudice against HIV more evident than with 25-year-old Joey. He and his partner play around together. "We usually meet guys at a bar, talk and see what they're into," Joey says. "We bring [HIV] right up on the car ride back to our house. We say we are both negative and ask their status. If somebody did [have HIV], we'd probably give them a ride home. It just couldn't happen."

To avoid that kind of humiliation, many HIV-positive men have simply stopped disclosing.

A second reason for the conspiracy of silence is that knowing one another's HIV status is a burden many of us are unwilling to

shoulder. As 42-year-old George says: "One fellow I dated for three months was [positive], but it became too much of a mind trip. You worry even though you think you're being safe and minimizing your risk."

Steve, a 34-year-old business owner, says: "I don't talk about it because I feel like: 'Does it really matter? That person could be lying.'"

And yet, by not talking about it, Steve is needlessly putting himself at risk and perpetuating the falsehood that silence is "golden."

Another explanation is that talking about HIV can be a buzz kill, a cock block. "The last thing you want to be reminded of," says 36-year-old Jim, "is that there is something dangerous that is communicable by these methods. That's kind of an ice cube down the back."

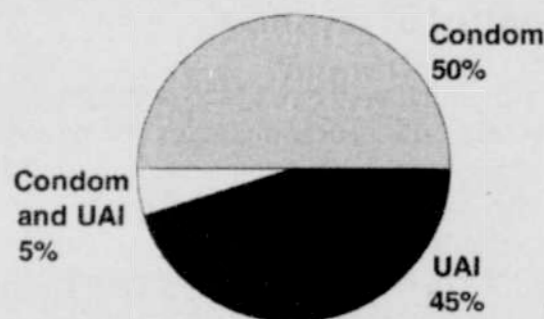
Eddie agrees: "I'm one of those people who need to stop everything [to talk about HIV], and it always ruins the mood. There's never flow or if there is, it's unprotected."

Or, as Darien puts it, "Asking seems to kill the heat of the moment and the anonymity of the sports fuck." He continues: "As you get older, you strike while the iron's hot. It's an act of God that you can get it up while a hot thing is paying attention to you anyway. Can you imagine fucking with a rubber?"

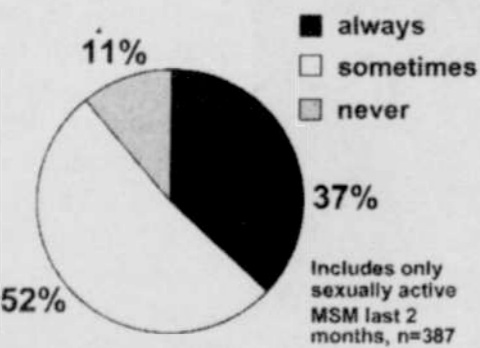
Another factor that impedes adequate talk about HIV, as well as intimacy and reasoning, is abuse of alcohol and drugs. As 31-year-old

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MSM condom use at last encounter (n=652)



MSM condom use, last 2 months (n=387)



Charts of condom use and unprotected anal intercourse among men who have sex with men, from the June 17, 2003, edition of *CD Summary* by the Oregon Department of Human Services



"The Three Amigos" were created by independent producers Firdaus Kharas and Brent Quinn for a series of public service announcements on HIV prevention

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