Giving It Up

Why people with HIV are going without sex—on purpose

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Las Vegas isn't the easiest town for ditching sex and booze. But in 2004, HIV positive Sin City resident Bobby Crone, 40, did just that. "I'd been mixing alcohol with sex," says Crone. "I used condoms, but I didn't always disclose, and I felt guilty. I also got pneumonia and decided I had to change my lifestyle and start taking HIV seriously." And so Crone, a loyal Democrat, adopted a lifestyle that would make any right wing virtue-crat salivate: He opted to abstain from casual sex until he met the One. "Abstinence is a very personal choice," Crone says. "I didn't do it because somebody told me to."

The June edition of the *American Journal of Public Health* reports that regardless of political affiliation, 18% of positive heterosexuals and 11% of positive men who have sex with men (MSM) abstain from sex deliberately, a chunk that exceeds the general population's. "We want to understand what [people with HIV are] doing," says study author and RAND Corporation psychologist, Laura Bogart, PhD. "It can help provide choices to reduce risk—whether it's condoms, abstinence or limiting sexual activities."

While MSMs reported opting for abstinence due to feelings of responsibility for their partners' health, heterosexuals more often cited their own poor health as motivation. All participants with CD4 counts below 50 were more likely to abstain for health reasons. However, Perry Halkitis, PhD, director of the Center for Health, Identity, Behavior & Prevention Studies at New York University, contends that the survey did not adequately probe abstainers' reasoning. "[What about] fear of rejection or if you're having rampant diarrhea from new meds?" Moreover, he believes, positive people have always endorsed abstinence. "Abstinence is a fine choice if it is for his or her physical or mental health," he says. "The pressure of having to worry about getting other infections or transmitting the virus may outweigh the psychological benefits of sex for some."

Two years later, Crone is still waiting to find Mr. Right yet feels confident that he made the right decision. "Sure, I get lonely," he says. "But I don't want intimacy from somebody who just wants sex."

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