HIV Status Unknown for Most "Negative" Men Online

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Seventeen percent of HIV-positive men who have sex with men (MSM) and nearly three quarters of MSM who've never been tested for HIV say they are HIV negative in their online profiles, according to a study published in the September issue of the *Journal of Urban Health*.

The popularity of sex and dating websites for MSM ballooned quickly during the past decade and a half. Relatively little research, however, has been published on how MSM use the Internet to find sex partners and how it influences communication and choices about safer sex. To investigate the online communication and behavior of MSM, Keith Horvath, PhD, and his colleagues from the University of Minnesota recruited men through banner advertisements on a popular gay sex and dating website, which was not named in the journal article.

The advertisements attracted 15,425 people, of whom 7,547 were screened for eligibility and 2,716 completed a thorough survey. Sixty-one percent of the respondents were younger than 30 and only 12 percent were 40 or older. Twenty-five percent described themselves as Latino, 15 percent as black, 19 percent as Asian and 27 percent as white. Twenty percent lived in small towns or rural areas, 49 percent in medium-sized cities or suburbs, and 31 percent in urban areas. A quarter of the men said they had only one online profile, 20 percent said they had four or more profiles, and 16 percent said they had no online profiles.

Horvath's team separated the participants into three groups. In the first group, 469 reported having never been tested for HIV. In the second group, 2,110 said they'd been tested and received an HIV-negative diagnosis. The men in the third group, 119 in total, had all tested positive for HIV.

Of the men who'd never been tested for HIV, 72 percent said that all of their online profiles stated their HIV status as negative, while 17 percent of HIV-positive men stated in their online profile that they are HIV negative. Roughly 56 percent of both men who'd never been tested and those who reported being HIV negative said in their online profiles that they only engage in safer sex. This compared to 33 percent of HIV-positive men.

Eleven percent of the men who'd never been tested for HIV reported having unprotected anal sex with partners they met online in the past year, while 13 percent of HIV-negative men and 33 percent of HIV positive men did so. Sexual behavior was statistically similar whether the men met their partners online or offline.

The authors write that for HIV-positive men, “Nondisclosure or misrepresentation of an HIV-positive status may be a consequence of HIV stigma and fear that disclosing one’s HIV-positive status will result in less men being interested in having sex with them.” In addition, the researchers note that the higher percentage of unprotected anal sex among HIV-positive men may be happening most frequently with other HIV-positive men.

Horvath and his team also comment that the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that roughly 25 percent of people who are HIV positive do not know their HIV status. That a quarter of the men in this study who’d never been tested claim to be HIV negative in their profiles and that as many as 11 percent of them engage in unprotected anal sex could have a significant impact on HIV transmission trends.

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