

Gay men, alcohol and sex

Findings from the QUICKIE project for HIV educators and other health professionals

Background

Sexually active gay men in Sydney were interviewed in 2007 and 2008 about a range of topics, including their use of licit and illicit substances. During both years participants were asked about their alcohol consumption, their perception of alcohol as a drug, how they thought alcohol use affected their sexual practices and how they managed their alcohol consumption.

Perceptions of alcohol

Alcohol was seen as a substance that facilitated social interaction, helping people to relax and enjoy themselves, but it was also recognised as a potentially problematic substance. Participants saw alcohol consumption as a common (and normal) feature of socialising among gay men. As one participant wryly put it, 'alcohol is very important to many gay men' (Ray, 47, HIV-positive). QUICKIE participants described a range of alcohol use, with some men drinking rarely (if at all), while others drank regularly and, at times, to excess:

'I never get like crazy or something, just in control. Just a couple of drinks on special occasions usually, not drinking every day.'
(Jali, 38, HIV-negative)

'I drink one or two drinks most nights of the week, which I'm actually not very happy about, but I will go out to the pub, and I'll drink more than one or two, but I generally don't get drunk, like tipsy, but I hate drunk.'
(Horatio, 39, HIV-negative)

'I am a binge drinker occasionally I will sit down and drink a bottle of red wine, and I might have a glass once a week or something. If there is a bottle there I can sit there quite happily, drink the whole lot and go to bed.'
(Sam, 45, HIV-negative)

Most men thought that alcohol was a problematic substance if used excessively. Getting drunk was generally viewed as an undesirable outcome to be avoided, if possible. Some men believed getting drunk was more problematic for them than using certain illicit drugs:

'...if I take ecstasy I'm very much more with it, whereas if I get really rotten drunk I lose all sense of what I'm doing'
(Gabriel, 27, HIV-negative)

Alcohol and sex

Alcohol was seen as having variable effects on sexual desire, sexual performance and the capacity to initiate and maintain safe sex. Some men saw alcohol as a substance that enhanced sex, making them feel more confident, reducing inhibitions and intensifying pleasure:

'...alcohol is definitely something that makes me more likely to have sex with someone, I think, because the situation is social and more likely for me to feel confident'
(Caleb, 23, HIV-negative)

'When I'm a little tipsy I quite enjoy it [sex]... It actually intensifies it. Whether that's because I'm relaxed or not I don't know.'
(Ray, 48, HIV-positive)

'I love sex when I'm drunk. I love it, yes, it's good... it takes more time for me to ejaculate so I can last longer, and I think you get less inhibition for whatever – toys or positions.'
(Octavio, 32, HIV-negative)

In contrast, other men described how drinking alcohol reduced their interest in sex or their ability to perform sexually, particularly after more than a few drinks:

'...my libido goes down with alcohol, like I'm less sort of, less, less attracted,

and feel less attractive I guess, so it doesn't really heighten me sexually, drinking. Maybe a few glasses, something like that, it might raise your flirtation level, but then past that, it doesn't do anything for me.' (Sean, 35, HIV-negative)

A small number of men described occasions where they felt that being drunk had led to unsafe sex, while others believed their safe sex practices were unaffected by alcohol consumption:

'...there have been occasions in my sexual life, where I have through being drunk yes, avoided a condom, mainly because it just inhibits the situation, but I think I'm finally getting my act together. I now see the real value of a HIV-negative result, so I'm a bit more inclined to behave myself a bit more these days... I'd be inclined not to even have sex now if I've been under the influence of alcohol.

(Toby, 39, HIV-negative)

'...it [alcohol] doesn't really make me horny or interested in people if I wasn't already in that state... I'd have to be really, really drunk to be less cautious – when it comes to, particularly, condom usage and things like that.' (Adonis, 26, HIV-negative)

Managing drinking and its effects

Men in the QUICKIE project described a range of ways in which they attempted to manage their drinking and the negative effects of alcohol. Many men described how they limited drinking to certain times, or tried to have a number of alcohol-free days each week:

'Well I got into the habit... of having Monday to Thursday alcohol-free days and limiting wine to Friday, Saturday, Sunday.' (Jeffrey, 53, HIV-negative)

'...around alcohol, I try to have a couple of days a week when I don't drink.' (Ron, 48, HIV-negative)

Other men said they limited the time they spent in licensed venues, arranged to go home before they drank too much, or stayed at home where they felt they could better control their alcohol consumption:

'...keep myself away from the venues and the clubs, just stay away, or if I go out, have one drink and then force myself to go home with friends, and kind of maintain it that way.' (Adrian, 21, HIV-negative)

'I had some bad experiences with alcohol where I felt vulnerable so these days when I'm out my first rule is to be home by 10.30 or I drink at home where I'm safe.' (Peter, 47, HIV-positive)

Conclusion

- Alcohol is a commonly used substance by gay men. Drinking is seen as a normal and enjoyable part of socialising but excessive drinking and drunkenness are viewed as problematic.
- The men in the study did not describe a straightforward relationship between alcohol use and their sexual practices. Some described alcohol as increasing confidence and having a positive, aphrodisiac effect, while others said drinking reduced their interest in, or ability to engage in, sex.
- A few men described incidents of unsafe sex while inebriated. Others believed that drinking or being drunk had little effect on their safe sex practices.
- Most men could describe ways in which they managed their use of alcohol, such as by having alcohol-free days, limiting the time spent in licensed venues or socialising at home. These practices could be built upon in encouraging alcohol-directed harm reduction activities among gay men.

About the project

The Qualitative Interviews Concerning Key Issues and Experiences (QUICKIE) project was a qualitative study that investigated key aspects of gay men's lives in Sydney, including sex, relationships, community engagement and HIV. The project provided a way to contextualise issues identified in behavioural research and to identify emergent issues of relevance to gay men. Participants were sexually active HIV-negative and HIV-positive gay men living in Sydney, New South Wales. Thirty-one men aged between 20 and 71 were interviewed in 2007 and 29 men aged between 21 and 73 took part in 2008. Twenty-four of the men interviewed in 2007 were also interviewed in 2008. Sexual activity, condom use, safe-sex practice and the use of licit and illicit substances were topics covered in both years. All names attributed to participants are pseudonyms.

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Advice

If you feel you have a problem with alcohol and are considering counselling or treatment, please call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service on 1800 422 599 for information on local services. For useful advice on the effects of alcohol and how to assess and manage your drinking, see www.reachout.com.au/default.asp?ti=68

Further information

For further information about the QUICKIE project, contact Dr Martin Holt at the National Centre in HIV Social Research (02 9385 6776 m.holt@unsw.edu.au).