

How many is too many? Gay men's perceptions of numbers of sexual partners

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

Background

Guidelines suggest that all sexually active gay men should undergo testing for sexually transmissible infections (STIs) at least once a year, and that men should seek more frequent testing if they have 10 or more partners in a six-month period (STIGMA, 2008). However, education campaigns encouraging testing for STIs among Sydney gay men do not specify numbers of partners, instead encouraging those with greater numbers of sexual partners to test more frequently than other men. For instance, a recent ACON campaign ('More STI tests') employed messages such as 'The more you root around...' or 'The more cocks you suck... the more STI tests you need' (see Figure 1). In interviews with sexually active gay men in Sydney we explored how men might interpret these messages by asking them about their levels of sexual activity and what they considered normal and high numbers of sexual partners.

How many partners is a lot?

Participants described numbers of sexual partners in relation to what they perceived as 'high' or 'low' levels of sexual activity. What men thought was a normal or usual number of sexual partners varied quite considerably:

Per year? I think one or two a week is a lot.
(Adonis, 26, HIV-negative)

Probably in a year I would rate myself at maybe 500 or so people a year maybe...
On an average, I'd probably say I'd sleep with 10 people over a period of a month.
(Baxter, 47, HIV-positive)

This weekend I had sex with one, two, three, only three people... it could be 10 in a week. If you go to a [group sex] party, you could be having sex with 20 people in one night really.
(Chahaya, 46, HIV-positive)

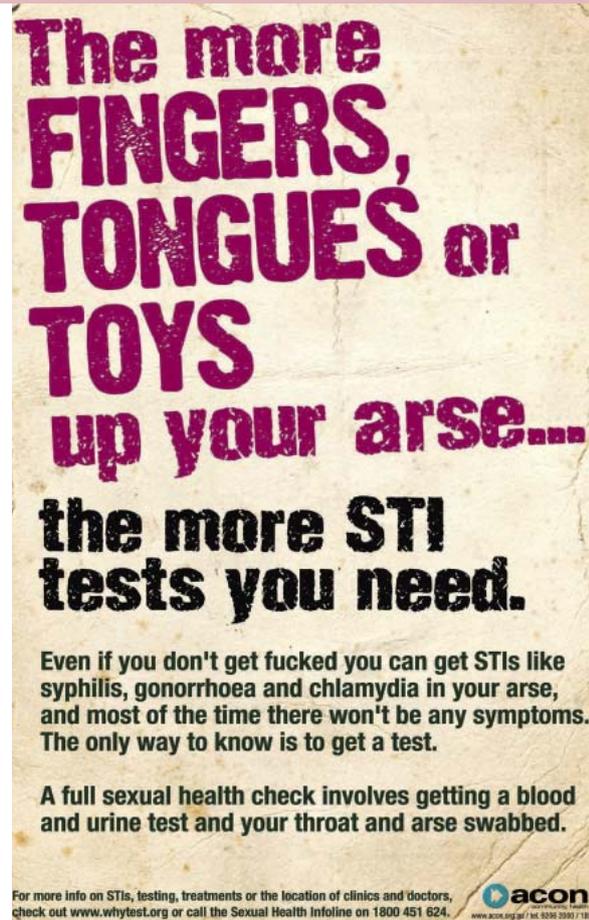


Figure 1: Example of a poster from the ACON 'More STI Tests' campaign

I suppose three or four times a week would be sort of standard. I think that's probably in the medium to high side...
(Barclay, 43, HIV-negative)

I'd probably say at the moment my level of activity is probably low, and how many is high...? Well, one a week, two a week.
(Damien, 39, HIV-negative)

I would say that probably six upwards in a year is bordering on, or starting to get to the promiscuous side.
(Dennis, 31, HIV-negative)

Based on their responses, it appears that many of the men in the QUICKIE study who regarded their level of sexual activity as normal, average or 'standard' would be classified as highly sexually active in STI testing guidelines i.e. having at least 10 partners in a six month period. It is recommended that these men seek STI testing every three to six months (STIGMA, 2008). While many of the QUICKIE participants did undergo testing twice a year, it is unlikely that they would have perceived a need to test more regularly as they rarely saw themselves as highly sexually active.

How do you define 'partner'?

Other men suggested that assessing their level of sexual activity in response to education messages was difficult because they were unsure what 'counted' as sex in those messages. For instance, some men noted the assessment of partner numbers was reliant on what was defined as sexual activity:

There's no answer to that question. It depends on where you define the point of sexual interaction, whether it's a hand job, whether it's full penetration, whether you include kissing, a snog in a bar, etc. It depends on whether if you're standing in a circle of 10 people at an orgy and you have a grope and all 10 of you come, do you include all ten people?
(Ray, 48, HIV-positive)

Campaigns like ACON's 'More STI tests' have addressed the issue of what counts as sexual activity by highlighting a range of practices that can increase the chance of sexually transmissible infections being passed on e.g. oral sex, oral-anal and digital-anal practices and using sex toys. However, gay men may still struggle to work out whether non-specific messages about levels of sexual activity apply to them.

Conclusion

- What men consider a 'normal' or 'high' level of sexual activity varies quite considerably. Many men who consider their level of sexual activity as 'moderate' or 'average' would be regarded as highly sexually active according to STI testing guidelines.

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).

For information on sexually transmissible infections, testing guidelines or where to get tested, please visit <http://www.whytest.org> or <http://thedramadownunder.info>

- There may be a mismatch between education messages about STI testing that do not explicitly define levels of sexual activity and their target audience, i.e. men who would be regarded as eligible for more regular testing may not see themselves as needing more regular tests.
- Unclear messages related to partner numbers should be clarified in order make it easier for gay men to assess when it is advisable for them to seek STI testing.
- It was suggested that men could be regarded as 'promiscuous' or 'slutty' even when they had relatively few sex partners, so care should be taken to avoid stigmatising men regarded as highly sexually active.

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. One of the topics of the 2008 interviews was men's perceptions of numbers of sexual partners. All names attributed to participants in this fact sheet are pseudonyms.

Acknowledgments

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Reference

STIGMA. (2008). *Sexually transmitted infection testing guidelines for men who have sex with men*. Sydney: Sexually Transmitted Infections in Gay Men Action Group.