

# What are transgender men's HIV prevention needs?

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## Who are transmen?

Transgender ('trans') is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and expression do not conform to norms and expectations traditionally associated with their sex assigned at birth. Transgender men, or transmen, are people who were assigned 'female' at birth and have a male gender identity and/or masculine gender expression. Transgender people may self-identify and express their gender in a variety of ways and often prefer certain terms and not others. Some who transition from female to male do not identify as transgender at all, but simply as men. In general, transmen should be referred to with male pronouns. However, if you are unsure it is best to respectfully ask a person what terms and pronouns they prefer.

Accurate information about the diversity of transmen's bodies is not widely available. Transmen have different types of bodies, depending on their use of testosterone and gender confirmation surgeries (which may include chest reconstruction, hysterectomy, metoidioplasty, phalloplasty,<sup>1</sup> etc.; see [www.ftmguide.org](http://www.ftmguide.org) for further information). Transmen use a broad range of terms and language to identify their sex/gender, describe their body parts, and disclose their trans status to others. For instance, some transmen are not comfortable with the terms 'vagina' and 'vaginal sex' and may prefer 'front hole' and 'front sex' or 'front hole sex', although this is not true for all transmen. This diversity creates unique needs and barriers for negotiating and adhering to safer sex practices that are not addressed by current HIV prevention programs.

## What do we know about HIV and transmen?

The transgender community is diverse and not enough research has been conducted with trans people in general. We have very limited information about transmen in particular. To date, research related to HIV among trans people has almost exclusively focused on transwomen (people who were assigned 'male' at birth and have a female gender identity and/or feminine gender expression). However, there is evidence that there is a significant subgroup of transmen that engage in unprotected sex with non-trans men (trans MSM), including some transmen who engage in sex work.

Several cities have conducted needs assessments that focus on or are inclusive of transmen and HIV risk, such as Philadelphia, Washington D.C, San Francisco, and the province of Ontario. The few published studies that report HIV rates among samples of transmen have reported 0 – 3% prevalence.<sup>2-4</sup> These rates are self-reported, however, and are based on small, non-representative samples, so we do not have conclusive data about the actual rates. Due to the assumption of low rates of HIV among transmen relative to other high-risk groups, there has not been much research on risk behaviors among transmen.

We do know that HIV prevention messages are not reaching most transmen.<sup>5</sup> We also know that many trans MSM seek services at gay men's organizations, where there is little to no education

for transmen and their non-trans male partners.<sup>4</sup> Providers are generally not trained to identify or serve gay and bisexual transmen in culturally sensitive ways or understand their specific risks and prevention needs.

## What *don't* we know about HIV and transmen?

We do not have enough information about HIV and transmen. Data collection methods at testing sites do not accurately identify and track transmen or capture their experiences, which contributes to the lack of clarity around HIV rates among transmen.

Rates of HIV and sexual risk behaviors among transmen are also not well understood because transmen are often assumed to be primarily having sex with non-trans women. However, transmen, like other men, can be of any sexual orientation and may have sex with different types of partners, including (but not limited to) non-trans men, transgender women, and transgender men.<sup>6,7</sup>

## What puts transmen at risk?

In one study, a majority of trans MSM reported not using condoms consistently during receptive anal and/or frontal (vaginal) sex with non-trans male partners and low rates of HIV testing and low perception of risk.<sup>4</sup> In urban areas where HIV prevalence rates among non-trans MSM are estimated to be 17-40% and STI rates are increasing, trans MSM who engage in unprotected receptive anal and/or frontal (vaginal) intercourse with non-trans MSM may be especially vulnerable to HIV/STIs.<sup>8,9</sup>

Transmen may face complicated power and gender dynamics in their sexual relationships with non-trans men.<sup>4</sup> For some trans MSM, having sex with a non-trans gay male partner is a powerful validation of their gay/queer male identity, especially in the early years of transition, and may be more important than insisting on condom use. Some transmen who use testosterone have reported increased sex drive and increased interest in sex with non-trans men after beginning hormone use, which may contribute to their willingness to take sexual risks.<sup>4,10</sup> Transmen on testosterone and/or who have had a hysterectomy may have frontal (vaginal) dryness, which increases their risk for frontal (vaginal) trauma during penetration, thus increasing their risk for STIs, including HIV.<sup>10</sup>

Low self-esteem may contribute to sexual risk-taking among transmen. Rates of depression, substance use, and suicide attempts are high in this population, but multiple barriers exist to accessing culturally competent support and treatment.<sup>3,11</sup>

Drug and alcohol use is a major risk factor for every community, regardless of their gender identity. Transmen may

use alcohol or drugs to enhance sexual experiences or help to relieve anxiety about their bodies during sex.<sup>4</sup> Some transmen may feel pressure to use drugs in order to fit into some gay men's communities or subcultures. Although we have very little information about needle sharing for hormone or drug use among transmen, it may also be a risk factor for some.

## What can help?

**Online dating.** Many transmen meet their non-trans male sexual partners on the Internet. Meeting partners through personal ads may allow transmen to describe their body and gender identity upfront (if they choose to do so) and discuss safer sex with potential partners before meeting in person.<sup>4</sup>

**Educational materials for non-trans partners.** Transmen's non-trans male partners often do not have experience with transmen nor access to education about sex with transmen, which can lead to misconceptions about safer sex. For non-trans gay men, safe sex often simply means condom use with anal sex and they may not be aware of the risks associated with frontal (vaginal) sex. See the next section for information on available materials.

**Greater visibility in the gay community.** Gay and bisexual men need to be educated about the presence of transmen in their community. Increasing visibility and knowledge about transmen may help create a welcoming environment, help increase inclusivity, and help transmen feel more powerful in their relationships with non-trans men.<sup>7</sup>

## What's being done?

tm4m (tm4m.org) is a San Francisco-based project for transmen who play with men (or want to). They provide information, education, and support to transmen who have sex with men through monthly educational workshops and discussion groups, informational materials and continuously

working to foster acceptance and build community. tm4m is a collaborative effort co-sponsored by Eros, Trannywood Pictures and TRANS:THRIVE (a program of the API Wellness Center).

The Gay/Bi/Queer Trans Men's Working Group in Ontario has conducted a needs assessment with trans MSM, developed a sexual health resource,<sup>12</sup> and a website at [www.queertransmen.org](http://www.queertransmen.org). They are also providing training and consultation about trans MSM inclusion for prevention workers serving gay men across the province.

All Gender Health Online ([www.allgenderhealth.org](http://www.allgenderhealth.org)) is a study exploring the sexual health of non-transgender men who have sex with transgender people. The results will be used to develop an online intervention to prevent the spread of HIV and promote the sexual health of transgender people and their partners.

The STOP AIDS project in San Francisco, CA strives to include transmen in their programming and community education. They include transgender men in their mission statement and have changed their data collection methods to better reflect varying bodies and gender identities in gay men's communities.

## What needs to be done?

We need to implement more inclusive data collection methods to better capture subgroups of transgender people. HIV prevention and care providers should not assume that all men they see were assigned 'male' at birth. You cannot tell if a guy is trans just by looking at him. The best method for data collection is a two-part question: 1) ask about current gender identity and 2) ask what sex was assigned at birth.<sup>13</sup> If unsure, programs should ask transmen for their preferred name and pronoun and use those terms.

If rates of HIV among transmen are indeed low, we now have the opportunity to engage in true prevention work to keep those numbers low. Gaining a better understanding of transmen's risk behaviors and the different ways that they protect themselves will aid in providing appropriate and effective HIV prevention education to transmen and their sexual partners.

## Says who?

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