

“Understanding sexual partnerships among men who have sex with men”

Findings from: [Characterising sexual partners and partnerships among gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men \(GBMSM\) in the UK](#)

What was the study about?

The way men who have sex with men meet their sexual partners is constantly changing. Progress in HIV prevention and treatment mean that men who have sex with men can have sex with less fear. We still need up-to-date information on how sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are spreading in this community to inform and improve public health responses. We will partner with community groups to carry out the first study in the UK describing what sexual partnerships look like for men who have sex with men.

Why is this important?

It is important to understand how men who have sex with men interact with their sexual partners. This will help us understand how sexually transmitted infections (STIs) spread, and to help target STI prevention to reduce the spread of STIs.

What did we do?

We worked with community-based organisations to co-design a section of an online survey covering sexual partnerships for men who have sex with men. The survey was completed between November and December 2023. We asked about the number of male sex partners since August 2023 and looked at differences in age, ethnicity, sexual behaviours and communication by partner type. We asked about sexual partnerships by partner type, including 1) established partners (e.g. boyfriend, husband, partner); 2) casual partners (e.g. friends-with-benefits); 3) one-time partners and 4) uncertain partners (not clear).

Key findings

- Over 1,100 men who have sex with men completed the survey and described more than 2,300 male sexual partners. Most people reported having multiple partners, often at the same time. The most common types of partners were casual or one-time partners, with fewer long-term or established partners.
- Men were more likely to talk about sexual health and HIV status with established or regular partners, compared to one-time partners.
- Men tended to be closer in age to their established partners, while one-time partners were more likely to be much older or younger.
- Condom use was generally low across all partner types, although HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was used in around half of one-time partnerships where sex took place without condoms.

What do these findings mean?

These findings have shown that men who have sex with men have a wide range of sexual partnerships, which vary in terms of age differences, communication about sexual health, sexual behaviours, and prevention practices. This can help inform programmes related to sexual health and the prevention of STIs. These findings will help support a larger funding application to study how men who have sex with men interact socially and with their sexual

partners. The aim is to help understand how STIs spread and how partner-based interventions to reduce the spread of STIs can improve both individual and public health.