

getting together

Handy Dandy
HOW-TO
Handbook

handydandy.ca



the
ins and **outs**
of dating
& relationships
for **gay** and
bisexual
men.

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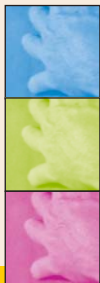
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love. sex. intimacy. commitment.
communication.



These are some of the essentials of relationships. Most of us have grown up with traditional ideas of what relationships should look like: the happily married, heterosexual, monogamous couple with 2.5 kids, a dog and the white picket fence. That's not the reality for many people. As gay and bi men, we've redefined things in many ways, leading to fulfilling, diverse, and complicated relationships.






Exploring the physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual and spiritual bonds that exist within our relationships is important, especially since HIV (the virus that leads to AIDS) continues to concern us as gay/bi men. **Some of us falsely believe that being in a relationship is an effective way to avoid getting or passing HIV.**

Research shows that many of us stop using condoms once we're in a relationship or when we think someone might be boyfriend material, potentially placing our health and our partner's health at risk.

Unfortunately, love is not a very good barrier against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) like syphilis or gonorrhea.



The ground rules we establish within our relationships are very diverse. Some guys may want completely monogamous relationships (where they only have sex with one partner), some prefer not to talk about the casual sex they have, and some want completely open relationships where each partner knows everything that happens sexually. Sometimes we talk about these ground rules, other times we don't, potentially leading to unnecessary risks.



No matter how you define your relationship, it's important to think about how you can better protect yourself and your partner from HIV and other STIs.

Maybe...

...you love your boyfriend and enjoy the sex but can't resist the urge to fool around with that guy you keep seeing at the clubs.

...you've just started dating someone and you think it might turn into something more serious.

...you think that your relationship is monogamous, but haven't actually discussed this with your partner.



...you're both HIV-positive and figure that you don't need to worry about HIV anymore, so why would you use condoms?

...that hottie you've chatted with online tells you he has a partner, but it's okay if you come over and have sex as 'no one has to know.'

...your lover suddenly suggests inviting someone over for a three-way.

...you're still with your high-school sweetheart but there's no more sexual attraction, leading you to fool around behind his back.



...one of you has HIV and the other doesn't, and you're worried about passing on, or getting, HIV inside or outside your relationship.

Does any of this sound familiar to you? Are you currently single, thinking of dating, playing around, dating someone new or in a relationship? Then keep reading as we explore the *ins* and *outs* of dating and relationships.



single? thinking of dating? dating someone?

So how come you don't have a boyfriend?

Do people keep bugging you with this question? Unfortunately, some of us feel pressure to be in relationships. Others get into relationships to avoid being alone.

Some of us think that relationships are a status symbol - some kind of success or achievement.

However, dating or getting into a relationship needs to be for the right reasons.

After all, it is possible to be single and to feel satisfied.

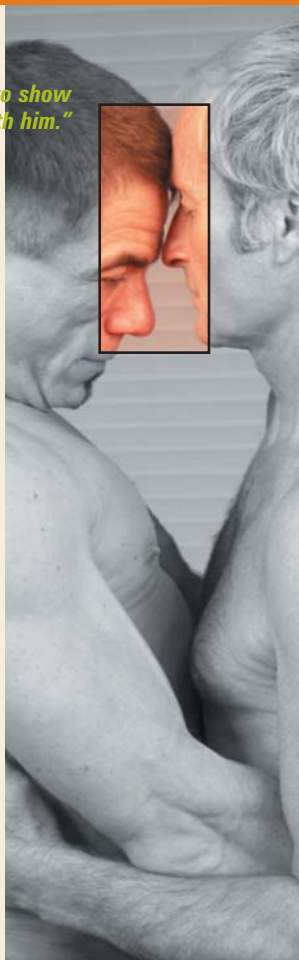


So you've met someone. Great! Now what?

*"I really think he's the one. I want to show
I'm in love with him."*

Did you just meet the man of your dreams? Whether it's love at first sight or a long-time friend for whom you have growing feelings, the beginning of a new relationship is usually a wonderful and exciting time. You're learning more about him. The sex is great. You genuinely like spending time with each other. It's all going right. You've been using condoms for anal sex (fucking) until now, but tonight you want to bring it to the next level, so you're thinking of throwing those condoms out the window. After all, you're serious about him, you trust him. What better way to show him you really want him, right?

Maybe you're HIV-positive and you've started to date someone whose HIV status you don't know. You've been planning to tell him you have HIV at some point, but were waiting to get to know him better, waiting for the right moment - to be sure he wasn't going to run screaming. You've been using condoms all along, and he suddenly says that he wants to stop using them. Now he's suggested ditching the condoms and you're not sure





what he means by this. Do you assume he must also have HIV? Or is he's HIV-negative and he's assuming that you are too? What do you do now?

There are safer ways to express your desire to bring a new relationship to the next level before you stop using condoms.

There's nothing wrong in wanting to tell someone you're serious about him. Unfortunately, some of us get infected with HIV during this stage of a new relationship. We might assume our partner is also HIV-negative without ever asking. Those of us who have HIV may not feel comfortable disclosing our HIV status right up front, preferring to get to know someone first before disclosing this. With a few rare exceptions, nobody intentionally wants to infect a new partner. But the reality is that 25% of gay and bi men who are HIV-positive in Ontario don't know it.



So how *can* you let him know you want to bring your new relationship to the next level?

Talk with each other! Let's face it: We aren't usually raised to discuss our thoughts and feelings with others. Don't be afraid to verbally express your feelings for him. He might just do the same in return.

Some of us decide to be monogamous with our partners for a period of time when we are in a new relationship in order to build more intimacy, trust and closeness. After learning more about each others' likes, dislikes and what we each want sexually, we can talk about opening up the relationship to other things.

But how can I show intimacy towards my partner when there is a condom between us?

First off, about 20% of gay and bi men never fuck. Some of us only fuck when we're in a long-term relationship. If fucking represents intimacy with your partner, there's a chance that condoms might represent a barrier to this intimacy.



It's been shown that those of us who stop using condoms at the beginning of a relationship will nearly always continue without them. If you're starting a relationship and your partner wants to stop using condoms, don't give in if you really want to continue using condoms. Explain to him that your decision is not a sign that you don't trust him or that you cannot be trusted; it's about caring enough about each other to acknowledge that mistakes can happen in any relationship. After all, nobody's perfect.

Some may think condom use within a relationship is a sign of failure. Rather, couldn't condom use be a sign of mutual respect and caring?

"I don't think I can ask for what I want. I'm worried he'll leave me."

No relationship is completely equal. When one partner has more power and control than the other, it becomes important to talk about this. Power imbalances in relationships can develop for all sorts of reasons; like being older or younger than your partner, having different ethno-cultural backgrounds or financial means, being unable to communicate effectively, being trans, or being more or less physically attractive. Power imbalances aren't one-sided: One





partner might have power in one circumstance, but not in another.

Be aware of the power you hold in your relationship. Make sure it doesn't prevent your partner from bringing up things of importance to him.

Abuse can, and does, happen in relationships between men. Sometimes the use of this unequal power (or the fear that it might be used) might make it difficult for you to insist on things important to you — such as condom use. If this is the case, talk to someone — a friend, supportive family member, or a community organization. No one deserves to be treated in this way.

monogamy and open relationships.

What does it all mean?

Most of us have relationships that aren't monogamous. Many of us have satisfying open relationships involving casual sex with other people. Some choose to start out a relationship being monogamous as a way of building trust and intimacy. Once they are more established with their partner, they talk about their desires and the rules about having sex with other people change. Some of us have emotional and sexual relationships with more than one person at the same time (polyamorous relationships).

But having a healthy and satisfying open relationship doesn't happen without a clear and honest understanding of what this means for *each* partner.

"We've been together for a while. I just assume he's not sleeping around"

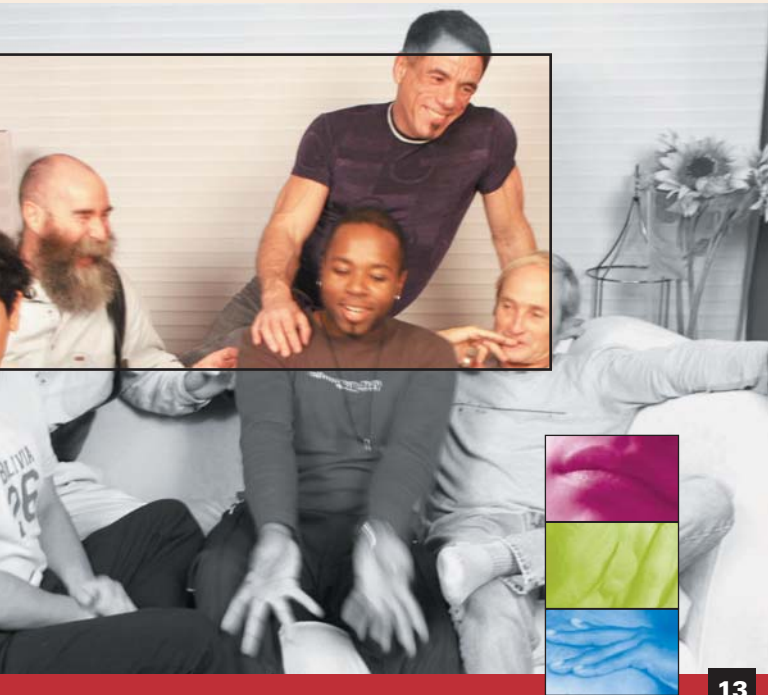
It can be easy to assume that a relationship is monogamous without ever actually talking about it, or about what it means - after all, that's what we've been brought up to want, right? (Remember the white picket fence?) Often, relationships shift



away from monogamy without discussion. Perhaps you go out of town and have a fling. Maybe you think your partner has fooled around on you. If you doubt that your partner is *only* having sex with you, how can you bring up the question without making him feel defensive?

“Sure... we’re monogamous with each other”

Some of us believe we’re in monogamous relationships, when in fact we each have very different definitions of monogamy. What *does* monogamy mean for you and your partner? Does it mean absolutely *no*

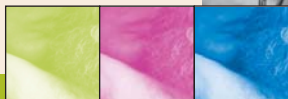


sexual contact with anyone else? Are you still monogamous if you only play with other people together in threesomes or group sex? How about blowjobs? What if you don't fuck? It can mean different things to different people.

Some of us make a distinction between physical or sexual monogamy and emotional monogamy. Having sex with others is acceptable as long as there is no emotional attachment to that other person.

"We don't think about it much. You know - don't ask, don't tell"

Some of us don't want to talk about sex outside of our relationship or prefer not to know what our partner does outside the relationship. We assume that our partner is also having sex with others, so it's okay if we do it too. But problems can arise when there hasn't been a discussion about monogamy and one of us does something to put ourself or our partner(s) at risk.



**i'm in a relationship
now so we don't need
to use condoms
anymore, right?**



Well, it's not that simple. A decision to drop condom use in your relationship requires open and honest talk about what kind of relationship each partner truly wants, and discussion about each other's HIV status.

**Do you want to
stop using
condoms in
your
relationship?**

First ask yourself if you both really want to be monogamous. Have both of you been in monogamous relationships before? If not, why not? If you've never wanted a monogamous relationship

before, what makes you think you can stick to the agreement?

Do you both have the same understanding of monogamy? What does it mean to you? Can you talk to your partner and make an agreement about sex with others (what's allowed, what isn't)?

Get yourselves tested for HIV and other STIs like syphilis, gonorrhea or chlamydia. Don't stop using condoms just yet. Wait the two weeks it takes for you to get your results back. Discuss your test results with your partner.

We're both HIV-negative:

If you're both HIV-negative, talk about what not using condoms in

your relationship represents for you. Talk about how you would feel if your partner had sex with someone else. What would you want him to do? How do you think you would react? Do you think your reaction would prevent him from telling you?

What if you or your partner had unprotected sex with someone? Would you try to bring condom use back in the picture? How would you do it? Are you prepared to admit you broke the agreement? What if your partner suggests that you start using condoms again with each other? How would it make you feel?

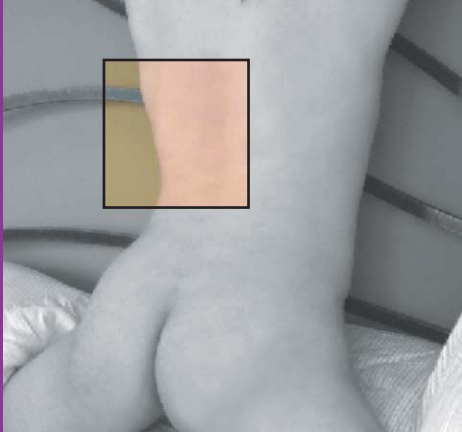
Once you've had a chance to openly discuss these issues, honesty and on-going open communication are essential to maintaining a condom-less relationship.

We're both HIV-positive:

It can be tempting to drop condom use in your relationship when you are both HIV-positive. Maybe you've already done this. But have you both considered the potential risks of your decision, such as re-infection with a strain of HIV that's harder to treat or that is more aggressive? While the

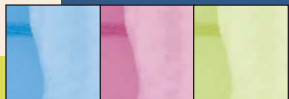







research hasn't clearly shown that re-infection with HIV can cause you to get sicker sooner, there is still a concern this might be true. We do know that some STIs — like syphilis — can be harder to treat if you already have HIV, so it's important to get regularly tested for STIs.

If you're both HIV-positive and in an open relationship, will you both only have sex with other HIV-positive men? How will you know if they have HIV? After all, if the other guy doesn't ask for a condom, he must be HIV-positive too, right? We've been told to always assume the other guy is HIV-positive. But how can you be sure he is? Could there be a chance he's assuming you're





HIV-negative since you didn't ask to use a condom? If you're having sex with HIV-negative guys, will you be able to always insist on using condoms?

on the hunt for sex outside the relationship

"We always use condoms with other guys"

Some of us stop using condoms for fucking within our relationships as long as we promise to use condoms for fucking when we play with others. For many of us, this plan sounds like a reasonable compromise: if all goes according to plan, you might reduce your HIV risk, but you are still at risk for other STIs like syphilis, chlamydia, herpes or gonorrhea (which can be transmitted through oral sex).

But what if things don't go according to plan?

Recent research indicates that almost 14% of gay and bi men in Ontario reported that a condom broke during sex and

almost 14% also reported a condom slipping off. Things can go wrong, even when you plan to use a condom.

In some cases, not using condoms with a primary partner can carry over to sex with casual partners. What would you do in this situation? Would you be able to tell this to your primary partner?





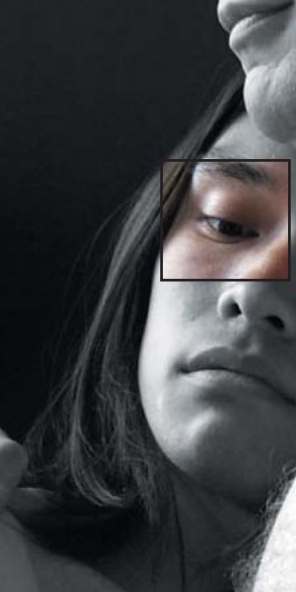
relationship troubles

Being in a relationship isn't easy. Sometimes it can feel like a lot of work. When we have stressful things going on in our lives, this can create even more tension within our relationships. Sometimes we might react to this turmoil by going

out and having sex with other people, even though this wasn't something we previously agreed was okay to do. Or, if you're in an open relationship, you might go out and have sex which places you or others at risk for HIV or STIs.

"How can I tell my boyfriend that I did something risky and we should start using condoms again?"

Nobody's perfect. Part of being in a long-term relationship is to learn the art of forgiveness.



If you're not using condoms with your partner, how can you bring up the fact that you broke the rules and fucked without a condom outside your relationship? By not dealing with this situation, you're putting your partner at unnecessary risk. Better he finds out now rather than when he discovers you may have knowingly infected him with an STI or HIV.



Find a moment to talk with your partner. Don't talk to him about this when you're having an argument about something else. Don't wait till you're having sex to bring this up. Explain to him you're sorry you did not stick to your agreement. Don't make any excuses and accept the responsibility of your actions. Let him know your priority is to make sure of his safety. Understand that he might be very upset and hurt. Give him the space he needs to sort through his emotions.

are you in a poz-neg relationship?

It's certainly not easy being in a HIV-positive/HIV-negative (poz-neg) relationship, but it's definitely possible, and it doesn't have to be scary.

Some of us who are HIV-positive avoid HIV-negative men for fear of infecting them. Some of us who are HIV-negative avoid HIV-positive men for fear of getting infected. These fears are real but not justified. Poz-neg couples *can* have healthy sex lives with each other and avoid HIV transmission, by using condoms when they fuck. Just like any other couple, poz-neg couples can also share every aspect of their lives together.





Are you in a poz-neg relationship?

Complicated feelings and emotions can arise when you share your life with someone whose HIV status is different from yours.

Are you poz? Do you feel your partner can never really understand what it's like to be poz? Do you think it would be easier if he were also HIV-positive? Do you feel you have to teach him everything about HIV and AIDS? Do you sometimes feel like you're being taken care of? Ever feel toxic, compared to him? It's a lot to deal with, along with everything else you have to face.

Are you neg? Ever felt guilty for not having gotten HIV? Has it ever crossed your mind that if you had HIV you'd feel closer to your partner? It may sound frightening, but for some HIV-negative men it can be an

appealing thought.

Talking about your feelings with each other is a practical way to work through these profound questions. Not only will you build a greater sense of intimacy and connectedness, you might find the answers to your questions. Chances are your poz partner doesn't want you to get infected just to show solidarity. Maybe your neg partner can't ever understand what it's like, but he can certainly empathize with, and support, you.



the ins and outs of dating and relationships

Talking, negotiating, and knowing your HIV status. Getting tested for other infections. Agreeing to rules about sex with other people and trying to stick to them. Talking honestly with your partner if you screw up.

It all sounds so complex. It's not easy.

But the reality is that gay and bi men continue to get infected with HIV. Often, it happens when we start dating, or when we're in a relationship. Some of us are able to successfully talk with our partners, develop and stick to rules about sex with others, and not place ourselves or others at risk for infection or re-infection with HIV.

Some of us find this too much

to even consider. That's where condoms come into the picture.

"For us, condoms are about respecting each other"

The choice to continue using condoms in a relationship is not an easy one. Unfortunately, for many of us, condoms represent mistrust. Instead, condoms can be seen as a sign of mutual respect and caring: You care enough about yourself and your partner that you don't want to worry about infection or re-infection with HIV or other STIs.



why?

Because...

you matter.

he matters.

we all matter.

For more information on HIV/AIDS
and safer sex, contact your
local AIDS organization.

visit:

handy dandy.ca

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