

THE SIGMA PANEL INSIGHT BLAST 3: Alternatives to bareback

Unprotected anal intercourse (colloquially known as 'bareback') is the sexual act most likely to transmit both HIV and several other sexually transmitted infections. Alternatives to bareback include not having sex (see Insight Blast 2). While still having sex alternatives to bareback include sexual acts other than intercourse, and using condoms (and Femidoms).

Making It Count 4 (MIC4) identifies having anal intercourse or not (when men have sex), and choosing to use a condom or not (when anal intercourse occurs) as two of ten key choices facing MSM that have a bearing on future HIV incidence in the population. Amongst other approaches, MIC4 supports a social marketing approach which includes raising awareness of the potential benefits of *not* having anal intercourse when sex occurs, and of the potential benefits choosing a condom when intercourse does occur, while it being implicit that it is MSM themselves who make these choices. It is an alternative to telling men what to do (which is ignored) and to associating preventative choices with the costs of risk at the level of social marketing (which has many and diverse unintended negative consequences).

This Insight Blast considers the commonality, incentives, benefits and advantages of (1) *not* having anal intercourse but instead having other kinds of sex, and (2) of using condoms if intercourse does occur. It should be particularly useful in the development of social marketing interventions.

Prevalence of anal intercourse with new sexual partners

Month 3 of the Sigma Panel (sent on 1st April 2011) was submitted by 1,729 Panel members. Panel members were asked about their most recent sexual session with a new sexual partner (that is, with a man they had not had sex with before). Of these most recent sexual sessions, 85% were with one other man while 15% were with more than one man.

Among the dyadic (two person) sessions, 45% did not feature anal intercourse and 55% did feature anal intercourse. This 55% comprised 22% of sessions where the respondent was insertive only, 24% where the respondent was receptive only and 9% of sessions where the respondent was both insertive and receptive. Among the sessions with multiple partners (threesomes and group sex), 33% did not feature anal intercourse and 67% did, a higher proportion than dyadic sessions. The 67% comprised 20% insertive only, 25% receptive only and 23% both.

INSIGHT: Anal intercourse is far from a universal feature of sex between men. Sex without intercourse is a common choice made by MSM. Without telling MSM not to have intercourse, and without suggesting the aim is to eliminate intercourse, communications promoting awareness of benefits of non-penetrative sex and the circumstances when it is the choice that will deliver the best sex and the best sex life.

Recency of non-intercourse sex and of intercourse with condoms

Also in Month 3, the Sigma Panel were asked the following three questions:

When did you last have sex with a man that did not involve anal intercourse?

When did you last use a condom for 'active' anal intercourse (you wearing the condom)?

When did you last use a condom for 'passive' anal intercourse (your partner wearing the condom)?

The figure below shows the cumulative percentage having done each act within increasing time periods.

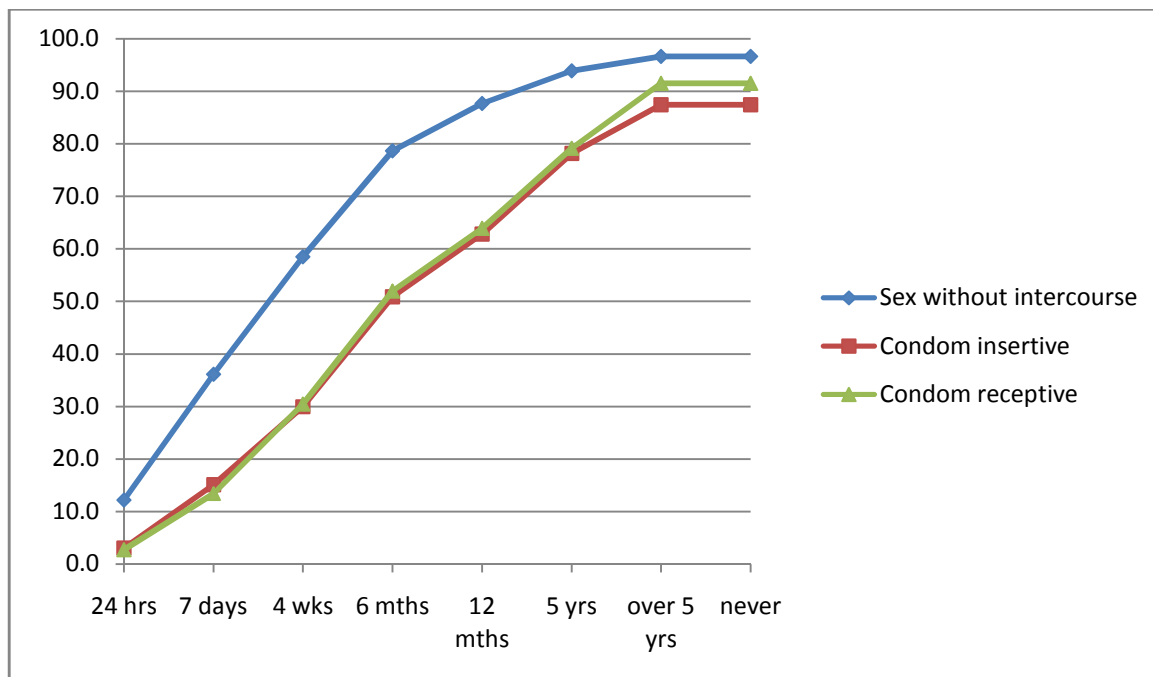


Figure 1: Length of time since (1) sex without intercourse, (2) condom use for insertive intercourse and (3) condom use for receptive intercourse (cumulative proportions). [The Sigma Panel Month 3]

In more recent time periods (reflecting the larger bulk of sexual sessions), sex without intercourse is a more frequently made choice than intercourse with a condom. More men had sex without intercourse in the last 24 hours and in the last 7 days than had insertive or receptive intercourse with condoms combined.

Benefits of Sex Without Intercourse

Men who said they had ever had sex without anal intercourse were asked the open-ended question "From your perspective, what are the potential BENEFITS (or advantages) of having sex without having anal intercourse?" (1404 men responded). They were also an identical question about the COSTS of having sex without intercourse (1326 men responded). The following table summarises the range of potential benefits and costs involved in choosing intercourse or not.

Table 1: Benefits and costs of having sex without anal intercourse (men who had ever had sex without intercourse with a man) [The Sigma Panel Month 3]

	Having sex WITHOUT anal intercourse	Having anal intercourse during sex
Benefits	<p>It's what my partner wants; can be done with a greater range of men. • More enjoyable / erotic than intercourse. • Variety; keeps it fresh; encourages exploration of other parts of the body. • More sensual. • More equal / reciprocal. • Easier to negotiate. • Easier to keep control. • Less serious, more relaxed. • Not too intimate; more emotionally neutral. • Keeps anal 'special'. • More spontaneous. • Can see/taste the ejaculate. • Can be done most places. • Can last longer. • Can be more intimate / loving.</p> <p>Less preparation. • Less time. • Less effort / less tiring. • If anal is not offered it cannot be rejected. •</p> <p>Safety / fewer risks. • Less concern about HIV. • Less concern about other STIs. • No worry about condom failure. • No guilt about risk. • Less chance of pain/anal tearing/piles.</p> <p>No need for HIV disclosure. • Less performance anxiety; less stressful; less likely to lose erection. • Less mess, cleaner. • No flatulence afterwards. • No need for condoms and lube. • Not needing to douche. • Not degrading, undignified, humiliating.</p>	<p>Pleasing / satisfying partner. • Feeling accepted by partner. • Retains partner's interest. • More enjoyable / erotic than other acts. • More intense pleasure/orgasm. • Feeling of completion / satisfaction / fulfilling. • Fun / exciting. • Feels sexually liberating. • More intimate / close. • More money (if selling sex).</p>
Costs	<p>Disappointed / unsatisfied partner. • Feeling rejected by partner if offer of anal is declined. • Partner might lose interest. • Less enjoyable / erotic than anal sex. • Less intense pleasure / orgasm. • Sex feels incomplete / unsatisfying / unfulfilled. • Dull / boring. • Feels sexually repressed. • Less intimate / less close. • Less money (if selling sex).</p>	<p>Partner does not enjoy it; limited range of men who want to do it. • Less enjoyable / erotic than other acts. • Routine; sex becomes stale; neglects other routes to pleasure. • Less sensual. • Inequitable / less reciprocal. • More difficult to negotiate. • Easy to lose control. • Too serious, less easy going. • Too intimate; emotionally charged. • Nothing 'special' left for steady partner. • Takes planning. • Ejaculate is hidden. • Needs a suitable location. • Can be over too quickly. • Can be impersonal. •</p> <p>More preparation. • Needs more time. • More effort/tiring. • Having the offer of anal turned down is hurtful. •</p> <p>Danger / more risks. • More concern about HIV. • More concern about other STIs. • Worry about condom failure. • Guilt about risk if unprotected. • More chance of pain / anal tearing / piles. •</p> <p>Feeling more obliged to discuss HIV. • More performance anxiety; more stressful; more likely to lose erection. • Messy, shitty. • Flatulence afterwards. • Need condoms and lube. • Requires douching beforehand. • Degrading, undignified and humiliating.</p>

The eroticism of anal intercourse for some men was balanced by its lack of eroticism for others. Some men have AI when they would rather not and others *vice versa*. Anal intercourse is not the universally desired option that is declined to avoid risk. Many men said the benefit of not having anal intercourse was that this was the kind of sex they preferred. Simultaneously, many men also said they thought other men were fixated on anal intercourse. Communications could promote the normalisation of non-penetrative sex, or highlight the exceptionalness of anal intercourse.

Overall, men came up with a much wider range of benefits of non-penetrative sex than they did costs. Conversely, the benefits of anal intercourse were expressed with far fewer phrases. However, the majority of benefits of non-penetrative sex were smaller amounts of the costs of intercourse.

Whether or not the partner wants anal intercourse and whether or not intimacy is desired with that partner mediate the benefits and costs of intercourse. The congenial but not overly intimate nature of non-penetrative sex makes it far more suited to many sexual encounters than is anal intercourse.

Independent of relationship to partners, the ease, cleanliness and relative safety of non-penetrative sex were the commonly cited benefits.

INSIGHT: In many instances the best sex with the least harm will be sex that does NOT include condoms because it does not include intercourse. Communications could represent those situations and provide evidence of the benefits of choosing non-penetrative sex.

Benefits and costs of condoms for insertive intercourse

Anal intercourse is an important part of many men's sexual repertoires, usually in particular circumstances with particular partners. Men are more likely to use the condoms the more positive things they associate them with.

Men who had ever used a condom for insertive intercourse were asked for the benefits (1293 men responded) and costs (1210 men responded) of using a condom for insertive intercourse. Those men who had ever used a condom for *receptive* intercourse were asked for the benefits (1182 men responded) and costs (1129 men responded) of using a condom for *receptive* intercourse. Many of the costs and benefits of cited were common to both insertive and receptive intercourse. Because answer to both pairs of questions were similar, we have combined them in the table below.

Table 2: Benefits and costs of using a condom for anal intercourse or not (men who had ever used a condom for anal intercourse) [The Sigma Panel Month 3]

	Using a condom for AI (Saddled)	Not using a condom for AI (Bareback)
Benefits	<p>Pleases partner.</p> <p>Safety.</p> <p>Lower STI and HIV risk (and so less need for screening, treatment, abstinence while treated).</p> <p>Feeling less obliged to discuss HIV/STI status.</p> <p>Appears responsible / moral / trustworthy.</p> <p>Demonstrates respect.</p> <p>Signals anal intercourse is desired and/or about to occur.</p> <p>Easier to relax and enjoy sex.</p> <p>Peace of mind / less anxiety after sex.</p> <p>Hygiene.</p> <p>Easier to dispose of sperm.</p> <p>Reduced sensitivity helps prolong intercourse.</p> <p>More comfortable.</p> <p>Promotes self-respect.</p> <p>Can enjoy orgasm while still inside.</p> <p>Can engage in fellatio after intercourse.</p> <p><i>For receptive partner specifically</i></p> <p>No need to evacuate his sperm afterwards.</p> <p>No embarrassment for making his dick shitty.</p> <p>Reduces anal cancer risk (from HPV).</p> <p><i>For insertive partner specifically</i></p> <p>Appears considerate.</p> <p>Reduces friction soreness on dick.</p> <p>Cleaner dick.</p> <p>He'll use a condom if he then fucks me.</p>	<p>Pleases partner.</p> <p>More erotic / horny.</p> <p>More kinky / more taboo.</p> <p>More intimate.</p> <p>Maintains the mood / flow of sex.</p> <p>Feels romantic / spontaneous.</p> <p>Natural feeling.</p> <p>Less undignified / ridiculous.</p> <p>Not as fiddly and fussy.</p> <p>No nasty condom smell.</p> <p>Penis stays attractive.</p> <p>Able to maintain strong erection.</p> <p>Can use spit as lubricant.</p> <p>No distraction during intercourse.</p> <p>Don't need any equipment (ie. condom).</p> <p>No money needed.</p> <p>No condom to worry about failing.</p> <p>No condom chore.</p> <p>No waste to dispose of.</p> <p>No evidence of infidelity to be found by regular partner.</p> <p><i>For receptive partner specifically</i></p> <p>More comfortable / less soreness.</p> <p>Enhances feeling of being 'taken'.</p> <p>Allows erotic (and anti-depressant) effect of taking sperm in rectum.</p> <p>Allows piss-enema after partner ejaculates.</p> <p><i>For insertive partner specifically</i></p> <p>Greater sensation in penis (especially on entry).</p> <p>More comfortable.</p> <p>Easy to cum.</p> <p>Freedom of ejaculation.</p> <p>Allows pleasure of cumming in his arse.</p>

Costs	<p>Annoys partner. Less erotic / horny. Less kinky / less taboo. Less intimate / psychological barrier. Destroys the mood / interrupts flow of sex. Feels clinical / premeditated. Unnatural feeling. Undignified / ridiculous. Fiddly and fussy. Nasty condom smell. Makes penis look unattractive. Difficulty maintaining a strong erection. Needs additional lubricant (cannot use spit). Distraction checking it is still in place. Needs access to condom (sourcing). Monetary cost of condom and lube. Condom could break or slip-off anyway. A chore. Requires disposal of condom & packet. Signals infidelity if found by regular partner.</p> <p><i>For receptive partner specifically</i> Anal discomfort / soreness. Detracts from feeling of being 'taken'. Prevents erotic (and anti-depressant) effect of taking sperm in rectum. Prevents piss-enema.</p> <p><i>For insertive partner specifically</i> Less sensation in penis (especially on entry). Uncomfortable; too big/small. Difficult to cum. Inhibits ejaculatory feeling. Prevents pleasure of cumming in his arse.</p>	<p>Annoys partner. Danger. Higher STI and HIV risk (and so more need for screening, treatment, abstinence while treated). Feeling obliged to discuss HIV/STI status. Appears irresponsible / immoral / untrustworthiness. Demonstrates disrespect. Requires some way to indicate anal intercourse is desired. Concern distracts from sexual enjoyment. Worry / anxiety after sex ('guilt hangover'). Unhygienic. More mess with sperm. Danger of partner ejaculating too quickly. Less comfortable. Undermines self-respect. Obligated to pull out before ejaculation. Too dirty to engage in fellatio after intercourse.</p> <p><i>For receptive partner specifically</i> Need to evacuate his sperm afterwards. Embarrassment for making his dick shitty. Greater anal cancer risk (from HPV).</p> <p><i>For insertive partner specifically</i> Appears inconsiderate. Friction soreness on dick. Shitty dick. He won't use a condom if he then fucks me.</p>
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The costs of using a condom appear to be of greatly varying sizes for different men. For some they seem to have little or no costs, even enhancing intercourse, for others they seem to ruin intercourse. These impacts are often related to men's sexual values and the ways condoms impact on them. Many men said that the costs of using condoms were 'none'. Many men said they liked condoms and preferred to use them than not. Others were scathing of them.

Men commented that they had never had intercourse without a condom, that they had not done so for a long time, that they could not keep an erection with a condom and so chose to only be receptive in intercourse (rather than have unprotected insertive intercourse). Many men stressed that, for them, no condom meant no intercourse. For some men, there are fewer positive benefits

to intercourse with condoms than there are to sex without intercourse. The predominant benefits of condom use are the reduced risks of the costs of not using them.

Several men said this was a 'stupid question' presumably because they felt the benefits of condoms are obvious and over-whelming. Although protected against infection and cleanliness were the overwhelmingly common answers, Panel members generated many other further physical and social benefits of wearing condoms.

For some men reduced sensitivity meant less risk of premature ejaculation and the ability to engage in intercourse for (pleasurably) longer periods of time (although one man said he came quicker when wearing a condom than when not).

INSIGHT: Several men mentioned the benefit of being able to go back to fellatio after anal intercourse if a condom is used. Surveys suggest only a very small proportion of MSM are attracted to scat. Social marketing could humorously harness the power of faeces both to promote non-penetrative sex and also to promote condom use.

Suggested Citation: Sigma Research (2011) *The Sigma Panel Insight Blast Month 3: Alternatives to Bareback*. London: Sigma Research. Version 1, April 2011.