

OREGON PUBLIC HEALTH DIVISION • DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

OH, WHAT A TANGLED WEB

The Internet is nothing if not an efficient tool for finding sex partners quickly. A 2006 paper reported that 40% of men who have sex with men used the Internet to find sex partners. A decline in this proportion since then seems unlikely.

On a recent day in Oregon at 10 a.m., one of the Multnomah County Sexually Transmitted Disease staff surveyed popular Web sites for arranging same-sex trysts and found* ...

- 193 men online live at *manhunt.net*
- 124 men online live at *adam4adam.com*
- 94 postings at *craigslist* from men seeking male partners
- 91 people online live at *gay.com*
- 1,000 postings for men seeking male partners in Oregon.

Perhaps you won't be surprised to learn that, on average, partners met via the Internet are more likely than those met via traditional means to be HIV-positive, and that unprotected anal intercourse is more common among men who seek sex partners online than among those who don't.¹ It is difficult to unravel epidemiologically whether the Internet is simply a tool for those people who would otherwise takes more risks than others, or actually the cause of an increase in risky sex. This issue of *CD Summary* explores the challenges and the opportunities of the Internet for control and prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

A SNAPSHOT OF CURRENT WEB PREVENTION EFFORTS

More than a year ago, the Sexual Health for Men Coalition, a Portland-area interagency workgroup dedicated to addressing sexual health issues among men, surveyed five local agencies involved in HIV prevention activities about their use of the Internet for prevention. These included

* Limited to Oregon users. Approximately 40% of users were located outside of the Portland metropolitan area.

two local public health departments, two community-based organizations and an academic institution. Common uses of Web-oriented strategies among respondents included the following:

- Purchase of banner ads on gay men's Web sites;
- Profiles on social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*;
- Posts about testing and treatment services on common sites for finding sex partners;
- Establishment of profiles by outreach workers on popular gay men's Web sites to 'chat' live with users about HIV prevention, testing, treatment;
- Establishment and maintenance of Web sites dedicated to HIV prevention;
- Promotion through links or advertising on community and public health oriented Web sites; and

- E-mail. (How does it make you feel to know that this one is so "yesterday?")
- All but one of these agencies had clear desires to expand online presence. Some of the barriers included lack of or ambiguity in agency policies regarding use of sexually explicit sites; privacy concerns; and limited ability to establish practice metrics.

A RANDOMIZED TRIAL OF ON-LINE BEHAVIOR MODIFICATION

The scientific literature is less than replete with comparative analyses of Internet-based interventions to prevent HIV. However, one group of investigators attempted a randomized trial by posting on a popular gay men's Web site banner ads inviting men who were living in rural areas and having sex with other men to go through three brief online HIV prevention modules in exchange for graduated financial incentives at each step.² Their story of recruitment illus-

WEB SAVVINESS TEST

Match the social networking site logo to the clue. (You will find the answers at the bottom of the page.)

1. This social networking site has to face up to the thought that it might be losing its "edge" due to recent influx of parents and grandparents, and mind-numbing status updates from someone who knew your brother in high school.
2. Uses "tag clouds" to link images of most popular subjects.
3. Bought by Google in 2006 for \$1.65 billion. Best place to look for video clip of Lindsey Wagner's appearance on ADAM-12 in 1971.
4. Limits "tweets" to 140 characters.
5. Allows users to notify sex partners (anonymously if they prefer) of one's recent sexually transmitted disease diagnosis. Points partners to local sources for testing and treatment. Used by nine U.S. cities, including (Yay!) Portland.
6. Facilitates same-sex liaisons. Started as telephone dating service. Includes enough profiles to date four million guys without seeing the same one twice.
7. This one is really simple—a family of web feed formats used to publish frequently updated works.



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The **CD Summary** (ISSN 0744-7035) is published biweekly, free of charge, by the Oregon Dept. of Human Services, Office of Communicable Disease and Epidemiology, 800 NE Oregon St., Portland, OR 97232. Periodicals postage paid at Portland, Oregon.
Postmaster—send address changes to:
CD Summary, 800 NE Oregon St., Suite 730, Portland, OR 97232

CD SUMMARY

March 16, 2010
Vol. 59, No. 06

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Portland, Oregon



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Home Return To Resources Database Volunteer Donate Return To CAP Website

Welcome...
...to our new Web-based Hotline.
Inside you will find all the most up-to-date resources around HIV/STD topics in Oregon. New features include:

- Live chat with trained Hotline advocates
- A statewide training calendar for providers
- Tips and advice for those living with HIV
- Frequently Asked Questions
- New Look

Quick Links

- HIV
- Testing Info
- Training & Events
- FAQ
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Enter Web-based Hotline

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links to outside HIV resources attract more than 10% of page views, and another 5% are to the page dedicated to HIV testing. However, the bounce rate[†] is 57%, meaning that most visitors don't navigate beyond the welcome page. How about "traffic sources"?[‡] All but four of 765 visits from Oregon users came from locations in and around the Portland and Salem metropolitan areas.

BECAUSE IT'S THERE

Now you know the extent to which sex is purveyed in the internet bazaar. To prevent sexually transmitted disease, public health, despite its current financial and technological disadvantage, will follow George Mallory and go to the Internet...because it's there.

REFERENCES

1. Liao A, Millett G, Marks G. Meta-analytic examination of online sex-seeking and sexual risk behavior among men who have sex with men. *Sex Transm Dis* 2006;33:576-84.
2. Bowen AM, Williams ML, Daniel CM, Clayton S. Internet based hiv prevention research targeting rural msm: Feasibility, acceptability, and preliminary efficacy. *J Behav Med* 2008;31:463-77.

[†]Bounce rate: the proportion of initial visits to a site that result in only a single page view. High numbers are bad, low numbers good. The lower the bounce rate, the greater the number of visitors that stick around and continue to other pages on your site. Twenty percent is great, <35% is pretty good; >50%: get a new webmeister.
[‡] The source of a Web site visit. One can arrive at a site directly by typing the site's uniform resource locator, or URL, into the browser address line, via referral from another site by clicking an embedded link, and via a search engine by typing one or more terms indexed to that site into the search engine.

trates the special challenges of translating traditional individual health behavior interventions to the online milieu. Of 1,900 initial responses, 500 were bogus, 783 were ineligible, and 192 didn't finish a required pretest. Therefore, only 425 individuals made it to randomization. Among the folks enrolled, only 294 made it through the third module.

Following the intervention, sexually active participants had fewer sexual partners, used condoms more, and were less likely to engage in anal sex.

Gains from this intervention were obviously limited. Nevertheless, after development and posting of the intervention on the Web, marginal costs for on-line recruitment and training

approach zero, so if risky behavior among participants declines even a little, the intervention may be cost-effective. It remains to be seen whether anyone would participate without a financial incentive.

WEB PREVENTION METRICS

The Cascade AIDS Project runs a site, supported by public health, for HIV prevention. The Oregon AIDS/STD Hotline (www.oregonaidshotline.com; box) gets about 310 visits a month from 160 unique visitors who each view slightly more than two different pages per visit. The home page accounts for about 50% of page views. Two pages offering general information about HIV (transmission, interpreting test results, medical care) and