

HIV Risk Factors and Behaviors among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Vietnam: Results from an Internet-based National Survey

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BACKGROUND

There is an increasing burden of HIV infections among men who have sex with men (MSM) in many countries throughout the Asia-Pacific region. The evidence shows that MSM have significant levels of multiple and concurrent partnerships, low-to-moderate correct and consistent condom use during anal sex and extremely low levels of HIV testing. However, there is a lack of comprehensive knowledge on patterns and these HIV-related high-risk behaviors and their predictors.

A quantitative Internet-based cross sectional study was conducted from August – October 2011 in Vietnam aiming to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Describe patterns and frequencies of HIV-related high risk behavior
2. Identify predictors of multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships, low-to-moderate correct and consistent condom use during anal sex and never having been voluntarily tested for HIV
3. Explore opportunities to develop specific targeted and segmented interventions to reduce the HIV acquisition risk associated with these high risk behaviors for MSM and their sexual partners

METHODS

Study Methods

Quantitative research included:

- Internet-based survey
- Survey developed in English, translated into Vietnamese and back to English for verification
- Questionnaire (in Vietnamese language) hosted on SurveyMonkey.com
- Banner advertisements promoting survey posted on 14 largest MSM social networking sites in Vietnam for participant recruitment
- Survey designed using standard questions, matrices and scales

- Survey designed in consultation with MSM community and key MSM researchers in Vietnam
- Survey took approximately 30 – 50 minutes to complete

Survey Components

- Screening questions
- General demographics
- Identity and socialization
- Sex, relationships and sexual behavior
- Venues for meeting men
- HIV and drug-use
- HIV prevention actions
- Multiple and concurrent sexual partnerships (MCP)
- Beliefs on sexual behavior and MCP
- HIV prevention services
- Knowledge about HIV

RESULTS

Participant Eligibility

A total of 5,128 individuals responded to the survey, with 2,077 respondents meeting the following inclusion criteria:

- Be 18 years old or older (78.2%)
- Be a male (88.7%)
- Be born as a male (84.1%)
- Be a Vietnamese citizen living in Vietnam (88.9%)
- Had sex (by hand, mouth or insertive/penetrative) with a man in the last 12 months (56.0%)
- Had not completed this survey before (81.9%)



Example of participant recruitment banner on Vietboy.net

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General Demographics

Among 2,077 eligible participants in this study, a majority were recruited from websites *Tao Xanh*, *Tinh Yeu Trai Viet*, and *Vietboy.net*. Participants surveyed were from 54 of the 63 provinces located in Vietnam including Ho Chi Minh City (60.8%), Ha Noi (10.2%), Can Tho (3.4%), Da Nang (1.9%), and Hai Phong (1.1%).

96.1% self-identified as being male. With respect to age, 86.9% were between 18 and 30 years old. 92.4% of participants reported being single. Most respondents completed vocational school, college or university (71.7%). A majority of respondents indicated they were students (44.0%) or office workers or sales clerks (32.5%).

Participants reported coming from a number of economic circumstances, ranging from earning no income to earning more than VND 10M per month (approximately USD 475.00). Most respondents (38.6%) reported earning between VND 1M (USD 47.50) and VND 5M (USD 237.50).

When asked to report on how much time they spent on the Internet each week, most participants reported spending 16 hours or more per week (48.5%) and 29.7% reported Internet usage of 8 to 15 hours per week.

Sex Partnerships

The majority of MSM surveyed reported having one male sex partner in the last six months (53.6%). A lesser but significant amount of respondents reported having 2 – 5 male sex partners in the last six months (44.2%). Only 0.6% reported zero male sex partners in the last six months and less than one percent of men surveyed reported 6 – 10 male sex partners in the last six months (0.9%).

Unfortunately, a large number of participants did not thoroughly complete the sexual history section of the survey (perhaps as a result of survey fatigue). Data from the sexual history matrix revealed that 109 of 188 participants (58%) reported having penetrative sex with concurrent partners in the last six months. 131 of 257 participants (51%) reported having pene-

trative sex with multiple sex partners in the last four weeks.

HIV Testing

A majority of MSM surveyed reported never having been voluntarily tested for HIV (76.5%). Participants indicated varied reasons for not being tested for HIV:

- 7.8% stated they do not think they are infected
- 6.7% reported being ashamed to get tested
- 3.8% reported being afraid to get tested
- 2.3% reported being afraid of a positive result
- 2.1% stated not knowing where to get tested
- 2% stated not having the time to get tested

Of those reporting having had a voluntary HIV test in their lifetime, 45.8% stated they were HIV negative, 3.3% stated they were HIV-infected and 50.9% stated that they did not know the results of their HIV test.

Out of the 23.5% of MSM reporting having been tested for HIV in their lifetime, 16.6% reported having had an HIV test within the last 12 months and 7.0% reported having had an HIV test 12 months ago or longer.

Condom Use During Anal Sex

More than half of MSM surveyed reported using a condom during penetrative sex with their last male partner (55.1%), while 44.9% reported not using a condom. 52.9% reported using a condom during penetrative sex with their last female partner, and 47.1% of participants reported not using a condom. Of those that reported not using a condom, the majority (20.6%) indicated that they found condoms impeded their sexual experiences and reduced their level of enjoyment.

36.8% of participants report they always use a condom with their long-term male sex partner, while 31.7% reported never using a condom with their long-term male sex partners. When asked about condom use with non-long term partners:

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- 58.5% of respondents said they always use a condom with their casual male sex partners
- 79.4% with their paid male partners
- 77.1% with a paying male sex partner

Overall, self-reported condom use was moderate-to-high among the population surveyed, with non-users of condoms representing lower percentages.

Predictors of HIV-related High Risk Behaviors

Five independent variables were found to have significant relationships with **engaging in multiple and concurrent sexual partners**

- MSM who reported **being students** were less likely to be engaged in MCP (OR = 0.58; 95% CI: 0.39 – 0.87).
- MSM **using the Internet to meet casual sex partners** were almost two and half times more likely to engage in MCP (OR = 2.39; 95% CI: 1.60 – 3.56).
- MSM reporting **consuming alcohol before or during sex** in the last six months were also more likely to have engaged in MCP (OR = 1.74; 95% CI: 1.19 – 2.54).
- MSM who reported **perceiving themselves as being at a risk of medium HIV infection or higher** were four times more likely to be engaging in MCP than those perceiving themselves at a lower risk of HIV infection (OR = 4.01; 95% CI: 2.49 – 6.46).
- MSM who reported ever **participating in an HIV prevention intervention** were less likely to have engaged in MCP in the last six months (OR = 0.66; 95% CI: 0.45 – 0.99).

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Four independent variables, out of 21 that were tested, were found to have significant relationships with **low condom use**

- MSM who reported having a **monthly income of less than VND 5M** were more likely to report low condom use than those who reported having higher monthly incomes (OR = 1.35; 95% CI: 1.01 – 1.80).
- Study participants **using the Internet to meet casual sex partners** were also less

95% CI: 0.53 – 0.99).

- MSM reporting **consumption of alcohol before or during sex** in the last six months were one and a half times more likely to report low condom use (OR = 1.54; 95% CI: 1.17 – 2.04).
- MSM reporting having **received any HIV prevention material specific to homosexual sex** in the last 12 months were less likely to report low condom use than those not having received HIV prevention material (OR = 0.62; 95% CI: 0.42 – 0.91).

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Four independent variables, out of 21 that were tested, were found to have significant relationships with **never having been voluntarily tested for HIV**

- MSM who reported having a **monthly income of less than VND 5M** were more likely to be never testers compared to MSM who reported having higher monthly incomes (OR = 1.99; 95% CI: 1.22 – 3.23)
- Study participants who **were students** were nearly twice as likely to be never testers compared to their non-student counterparts (OR = 1.88; 95% CI: 1.09 – 3.24).
- Men **using the Internet more than 15 hours per week** were less likely to be never testers compared to men reporting lower levels of weekly Internet usage (OR = 0.61; 95% CI: 0.40 – 0.92)
- Men reporting ever having **participated in a behavioral HIV intervention** were less likely to be never testers compared to respondents having participated in such interventions (OR = 0.56; 95% CI: 0.35 – 0.88).

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the urgent need for segmented and targeted behavior change interventions integrated into existing MSM programs to reduce and prevent the spread of HIV infection and other STIs among MSM in Vietnam.

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