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How risky is barebacking?



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Very! “Barebacking”—unprotected anal intercourse between men—is only safe when both partners are not infected with HIV or other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Otherwise, barebacking puts both partners—the one inserting his penis (insertive/top) and the one whose rectum is penetrated (receptive/bottom)—at high risk for infection (or reinfection) from HIV and other STIs.

Is barebacking less risky for the person on top?

Unless both partners are free of infection from HIV or other STIs, barebacking carries a high risk of spreading HIV, whether the person is the top or bottom partner. Although there are fewer cases of HIV infection among top partners, the number of infections is still significant. The myth that it is safer to be on top has:

- given some people a false sense of security
- made it harder for bottom partners to insist on condom use, and
- led to more cases of HIV infection.

The top partner may be exposed to HIV through:

- small (even invisible) cuts or tears on his penis
- sores or ulcers on his penis, or
- the thin lining inside the urethra (the opening at the tip of the penis).

Uncircumcised top partners may be at an even higher risk of infection from HIV and other STIs. The foreskin of an uncircumcised penis provides an environment where HIV may survive for longer than it would on a circumcised penis.

Is barebacking less risky for the bottom partner if the top partner pulls out before ejaculating (cumming)?

Unless both partners are free of infection from HIV or other STIs, barebacking always carries a high risk of HIV transmission, even if the top partner pulls out before ejaculating (cumming). This is because infected pre-ejaculatory fluid can get into the rectum before the top partner pulls out.

How can I reduce the risk of contracting HIV during anal sex?

With proper use of a condom, anal sex is a low risk activity—for both top and bottom partners. (This also applies to anal sex between men and women. See Question 14 “How risky is anal sex?” for more information.)

The risk of transmission is even lower if the top partner uses a condom and pulls out before ejaculation (cumming).

Do female condoms reduce the risk of anal sex?

Maybe. Female condoms were not designed for anal intercourse. Using them for anal intercourse may reduce the risk of spreading HIV and other STIs, but this has not been tested. The inner ring of a female condom should be removed for use during anal sex.

What if I have had bareback sex?

If you have had bareback sex (either on the top or bottom) consider getting tested for HIV and other STIs so you can protect your health and that of your partner(s) (see Questions 22 and 23 for more information on testing.)

For more information, contact your local AIDS service organization or health care practitioner.

For more copies of this fact sheet or other documents on HIV/AIDS, contact the
Canadian HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse, 400-1565 Carling Avenue, Ottawa, ON K1Z 8R1
☎ 877-999-7740 ☎ 613-725-1205 ✉ aidssida@cpha.ca www.clearinghouse.cpha.ca
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