

Heterosexual anal sex amongst young adults in South Africa: Risks and perspectives

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This research was made possible through financial support provided by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Johns Hopkins Health and Education South Africa. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the USAID.



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Background

Heterosexual sexual intercourse is the predominant mode of HIV transmission in sub-Saharan Africa. Studies of HIV transmission have included exploration of the mechanisms of sexual contact, noting that anal sex was rare. Gray et al (2001), for example, found in a study of serodiscordant Ugandan couples that anal sex was practiced by less than 1% of the study population, and that anorectal STIs were not seen. Outside Africa, the prevalence of heterosexual anal sex appears to be higher. For example, a study of young adults in the US aged 18-26 found that 23% had ever engaged in anal sex, and 22% reported anal sex with their current partner in the past three months (Kaestle & Halperin, 2007). In another study in California, 8% of males and 6% of females reported anal sex at least once a month or more, and most did not use condoms for anal sex (Erickson et al, 1995).

The relative risk of HIV transmission per sex act is 1.3 times higher for the insertive partner, and twice as high for the receptive partner, in comparison to heterosexual vaginal sex (Varghese et al 2002; Padian et al, 1987).

In South Africa there is little data on the overall prevalence of heterosexual anal sex practices, although a national study of youth aged 15-24 found that amongst those who were sexually experienced, 5.5% of males and 5.3% of females had ever had anal sex. Males reporting anal intercourse were more likely to be HIV positive. Less than one percent of males reported having male partners. (Lane et al, 2006). A study amongst female sex workers on a national trucking route found that 42.8% had had anal sex with their clients and that this group was more than twice as likely to be HIV positive than those who had only vaginal sex (Karim & Ramjee, 1998).

A qualitative study was conducted nationally in 2006/7 involving 74 respondents using interview and focus group techniques. Study sites included three cities in the Eastern Cape, Gauteng, and Northern Cape respectively, two informal urban settlements in the Western Cape, and a rural community in Mpumalanga.

The data gathered in the interviews involved reflection on previous relationships and specifically focused on the past two years. The interviews mainly focused on decision making and how relationships are managed, as well as examining the advantages and disadvantages of sexual relationships. Patterns in sexual partnerships were explored in detail, including choice of sexual partner, types and duration of relationships (including number of partners, norms regarding initiation of sex and concurrent sexual partnerships).

Reflections on previous sexual partnerships and factors to do with perceived risk were also explored, as were sexual practices. In focus groups, these issues were explored more generally.

Perspectives on anal sex

Whilst the qualitative data provide little insight into the extent of heterosexual anal sex practices, what is clear is that the practice is not uniformly rejected. The main rationale is to enhance sexual pleasure:

Interviewee: Yes I have tried it. I tried after hearing it from one of our discussions as men where one friend said that it is the best sex ever. He said that it is the kind of sex where ejaculation is guaranteed. So I tried it and realized that he was telling the truth.

Interviewer: So he had tried it as well?

Interviewee: Yes and it was exactly the way he described it. While I went to try it I found that unlike normal sex, I could not control my ejaculation, it just squirted out despite my attempt at stopping myself. It is almost impossible to control ejaculation when having anal sex (Male, 28, Mpumalanga).¹

Interviewee: My boyfriend, the one who is married, loves it. I ended up enjoying it as well.

Interviewer: Can you say it is a common form of sex in your area?

Interviewee: ... It is possible that it is more common than I know as some people are not free to talk about such things. You can find that people do have anal sex but are not free to talk about it. But some of my friends do talk about being with their boyfriends and doing such things.

Interviewer: When you tell your friends that you have had, and also enjoyed anal sex, what do they say?

Interviewee: I have told my friends about it. But you find some saying they do not like sex at all only to find that, more especially if it is your friend, you will know that she does those things, maybe she just denies them in front of you (Female, 26, Mpumalanga).²

Anal sex appeared to be a practice that was added to one's repertoire, once it had initially been explored.

Interviewee: The girl that I was having sex had a big vagina... I tried my best but I could not feel a thing. So I thought let me try the other hole... I just said let us try something different. And she agreed. I told her let us have a moment to remember, and we just did.

1 Int male 28 Mpumalanga.txt, 19051,19864

2 Int female 26 Mpumalanga.txt, 20322,21482

Interviewer: Was that the first or the last time you had anal sex?

Interviewee: No I had it before then. The first time it was just for experience, then I started enjoying it.

Interviewer: Is it easy for women to agree to that?

Interviewee: It is not easy, but if you are creative with your truth they end up agreeing. (Male, 22, Gauteng).³

In other instances, where anal sex was suggested it was resisted and rejected. Reasons included fear of being hurt.

The only problem I have was when someone wanted anal sex. My boyfriend wanted it but I didn't because it is not right for me... I suppose if someone wants to do it there, why then was the vagina created, if we going to use the other opening. So I told him I couldn't (Female, 27, Eastern Cape).⁴

It was also seen as a alternative to vaginal sex during menstruation:

A friend of mine once told me that the first time she tried it she was on her periods and her boyfriend convinced her to try it as he wanted to "ejaculate". She tried it and she said it was not as bad as she thought. They still do it when she is on her periods. I think she is now used to it. I have never tried it myself as I am scared I may be hurt (Female, 20-30, Gauteng).⁵

For others, anal sex was perceived as wrong on a number of grounds including being abnormal, being unnatural, being contrary to religious beliefs, being undignified,

Normal sex is the sex that happens through the right place, through the vagina. That is where sex is meant to take place. Taboo sex is sex that does not take place through the vagina. Things like anal sex are taboo as they use organs that are not meant for sex (Male, 20-30, Gauteng).⁶

Interviewer: Have you ever had anal sex?

Interviewee: No, I don't like it.

Interviewer: Why not?

Interviewee: Maybe I'm used to having normal sex... it's not natural. It's not an organ made for that purpose (Female, 25, Western Cape).⁷

Interviewer: Have you ever tried anal sex?

Interviewee: No, I have never tried that.

Interviewer: What do you think about it?

Interviewee: I think it is bad. The anal one, I have never tried it and I do not think I

3 Int male 22a Gauteng.txt, 25824,26911

4 Int female 27 Eastern Cape.txt, 34777,37299

5 FGD Mixed 20-30 Gauteng.txt, 73800,75250

6 FGD Mixed 20-30 Gauteng.txt, 73800,75250

7 Interview Female 25 Western Cape.txt, 12202,12417

*will ever try it. What is the point if doing that? God created a vagina, so why should we go to the anus for that (Female, 23, Gauteng).*⁸

*I don't think you place yourself in high regard if you do that. It's undignified (Male, 20-30, Western Cape).*⁹

Anal sex was also perceived as an unacceptable practice that was practiced by non-normative 'others' including 'people in jails', 'gays' and other race groups.

*I know a friend of mine who loved it. He was dating coloureds. They called it 'pap and vleis'... I think the people who practice it are coloureds. There are few black girls who'd do it (Male, 23, Western Cape).*¹⁰

There were a few respondents who recognised anal sex as potentially being riskier than vaginal sex.

*What I think of anal sex is it is just a small hole and when you look at what you have you can see that the hole is small, as you have a bigger penis. With AIDS what is important is the blood, blood contact - so in that way it is risky (Male, 22, Gauteng).*¹¹

Conclusions

Whilst there is very little quantitative data available about the prevalence of heterosexual anal intercourse in South Africa, the proportions of young people reporting ever having had anal sex are not insignificant. The qualitative data illustrates that anal sex is likely to continue after the one or more episodes when it is initiated.

Rationale for having anal sex are linked to sexual pleasure, and as an alternative form of sex during menstruation.

Anal sex is also seen by some respondents as a sexual practice that is inappropriate or taboo on a number of grounds including that it was potentially painful, abnormal, unnatural, undignified and contrary to religious beliefs. It was also seen as a practice associated with prisoners, gay men and particular race groups.

Whilst we did not explore the use of condoms during anal sex, amongst those respondents who practiced anal sex, there was little consciousness that anal sex was potentially more risky for HIV than vaginal sex.

⁸ Int female 23 Gauteng.txt, 10892,11298

⁹ FGD mixed 20-30 Western Cape.txt, 48165,50287

¹⁰ Int Male 23 Western Cape.txt, 16012,17069

¹¹ Int male 22 Gauteng.txt, 24136,24599

The risk of HIV transmission during anal sex is considerably higher than vaginal sex, and taking into account qualitative accounts of anal sex experiences, it is recommended that the risks of anal sex form part of overall HIV prevention communication.

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