

# Issues of Concern in Unprotected Sex Between Guys of this Serostatus

## Negative with Negative / Negative with Positive / Positive with Positive

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### **NEG with NEG**

*Can you know for sure that he's negative?*

The "window period of uncertainty" is not a huge problem anymore. Improved tests mean that 95% of HIV-infected people will test positive just about 3 weeks after infection; virtually 100% at 3 months.

Negotiated safety:

If both partners are HIV-negative, condomless sex may be o.k. How do you do it?

1. Get an HIV test.
2. Vow monogamy (you define it: no outside sex at all? Or just no penetrative sex outside the relationship?).
3. Test again. Still negative?
4. Make a pact agreeing not to leave partner if he confesses a slip-up from the monogamy pact.

You can now have condomless sex with very low chance of HIV infection.

### **Bottom up transmission?**

Couples may feel that they can have unprotected sex, as long as the HIV+ partner is always the bottom. It's true that, all other things being equal, the odds of a top becoming infected are lower (10x-100x lower) than the odds of a bottom becoming infected. But if either the bottom or the top has any undiagnosed STDs (anal warts, genital herpes, gonorrhea) this raises the odds 3x to 8x higher than the top could contract HIV. If the top is uncut (uncircumcised), his odds are 8x higher again.

### **Can someone be HIV neutral?**

We know that high levels of HIV in the blood ("viral load") correlate with higher chances of passing the virus. Since the cocktail of medicines helped many patients drop their viral load to undetectable levels, many began to ask whether from a contagion perspective, they were now HIV-neutral. While some studies show that guys with undetectable viral load don't tend to pass virus readily, others reinforce that there are no guarantees with HIV. Research shows that even as the medicines are whipping HIV in the blood, drug resistant strains can hide out ("compartmentalize") in the testes. One study found that the men with the lowest viral loads actually had the highest levels of HIV in their sexual fluids.

A Bad Thing Made Worse:

Other research shows that HIV+ people can pass drug-resistant forms of the virus to HIV- men, meaning that some treatment options could be unavailable to the newly infected guy (1/6th-1/4th of newly infected guys have resistant virus!).

## **NEG with POS**

### **Too late to turn back?**

Some HIV+ men believe that “the worst has already happened,” and that their HIV status actually liberates them from having to care at all about little nuisances, like STDs. They may decide that it’s OK to skip the condoms as long as the HIV+ person is the “bottom.” What they don’t realize is that the HIV- partner may be carrying undiagnosed STDs that can seriously threaten the HIV+ partner’s health.

### **STDs: Last straw on the camel’s back?**

Hepatitis B and C in particular are much more aggressive (threatening the liver) in an HIV+ person. Anal warts are more likely to become painful and difficult to remove. Certain herpes viruses may “upregulate” (that is, speed up) HIV’s reproduction in the positive partner. And an HIV- partner could pass CMV to the HIV+ partner, which causes blindness. Rather than being liberated from “small concerns,” HIV+ guys actually need to be extra careful to avoid coinfection with these STDs.

## **POS with POS**

### **Can lightning strike twice?**

Some early research suggested that HIV+ men who continued to have unprotected sex seemed to develop a “superpathogenic strain” of HIV, formed out of their original HIV and a second “dose.” Then medical opinion shifted. Some scientists held up smaller studies that suggested HIV could only strike once. Maybe reinfection was not possible, as an HIV+ person’s antibodies would block any new HIVs from taking hold.

### **Seroseparatism is Born**

Based on this news, some HIV+ guys formed a new philosophy: if we’re both HIV+, then we pose no further threats to each other by having unprotected sex together.

### **Re + Re (reinfection plus resistant virus?)**

Again, while this might usually be true, in the world of HIV, there are no guarantees. Last year, research shows that initial HIV infection provides no protection whatsoever against reinfection by different HIV strains.

Can a person be reinfected by the same strain (clade of HIV), though? This year a Canadian case proved that an HIV+ man could be reinfected with his partner’s same strain of virus AND catch his partner’s drug resistance. Upon reinfection, the Canadian man quickly declined in health, and was found to have inherited 4 protease and five nucleoside analog resistant mutations from his partner. While this may not happen all the time (the Canadian guy’s naturally undetectable viral load may have also “turned off” his antibody response, making reinfection easier), the case is chilling nonetheless.

Finally, the risk of coinfection with other STDs, noted above, also arises between two HIV+ men.

Positive guys may opt for skin-on-skin sex for reasons of intimacy, but they cannot be sure whether or not this will lead to health problems down the road.