

# LATINO GAY MEN

**A brief guide to understanding Latino gay men and their HIV-related concerns when planning and implementing HIV prevention programs**



## Who are LATINO GAY MEN?

The term “Latino gay men” refers to Latino men who have sex with men (MSM) and who also identify with a variety of words and categories that indicate a homosexual or bisexual orientation, such as gay, homosexual, bisexual, or queer. For these men, these words describe not only their sexual interests and behavior, but also a deeply felt personal identity based on their emotional and romantic involvement with other men. In the Latino community, some gay men may use terms such as loca, joto, pato, or maricón to self identify and to refer to one another warmly, even though these terms have often been used against them as an expression of sexual discrimination. The majority of Latino gay men feel they belong to a diverse gay world or community sometimes referred to as “de ambiente.” This community also includes male-to-female (MTF) transgender individuals, although MTF transgenders typically do not see themselves as either “men” or “gay.”

## Some Latino MSM

### DO NOT IDENTIFY as gay or bisexual

Some Latino MSM may identify as heterosexual or straight. This does not necessarily mean that they are in denial. Straight identified men may have sex with men for reasons other than sexual orientation such as:

- Financial need
- Incarceration
- Curiosity
- Physical pleasure
- Experimentation

Service providers and researchers must be sensitive to the complex relationships between sexual behavior, orientation, identity and gender for all groups.

## The impact of HOMOPHOBIA, POVERTY AND RACISM on Latino gay men

The social and sexual lives of many Latino gay men are impacted by homophobia, poverty and racism. These forces can create personal shame, financial hardships and social isolation.

## How many Latino gay men have HIV?

Latino gay men constitute one of the most vulnerable groups in the US for the transmission of HIV, showing some of the highest rates of HIV and unprotected anal intercourse.

- Latino gay men represent over half of all AIDS cases among Latino males in the US.
- In the Western region, Latino gay men represent between 80-90% of all AIDS cases among Latino males.
- By the end of 2003, a total of 112,595 AIDS cases among Latinos in the US were attributed to male-to-male sexual contact (this is most certainly under reported due to societal stigma).
- Studies suggest that 20-25% (one out of four or five) Latino gay men of all ages in large US urban centers may be infected with HIV.
- CDC reports that 14% of young mostly gay identified Latinos have HIV (double that of Whites).
- The majority (about 70%) of young Latino gay men who are infected do not know their HIV status.

Although some men respond with social activism, many others are deeply troubled and discouraged by family rejection, discrimination at work, and sexual objectification in the gay community. Latino gay men who have experienced more social discrimination and financial hardship in the recent past, as well as while growing up, are more anxious, depressed and suicidal. These same men are also more likely to participate in sexually risky situations.

Among Latino gay men, high risk sexual practices can take place even when they have substantial knowledge about HIV/AIDS and relatively strong intentions and skills to practice safer sex. Many of these Latino gay men confess a certain helplessness and inability to be safe in situations they consider difficult, such as when:

- sex is under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol
- sex is used to alleviate depression and loneliness
- sex is with a valued partner who refuses to use condoms

Because the same individual can act safely in one situation and unsafe in another, it seems more appropriate to consider “risk” as a property of contexts and situations, rather than an individual characteristic. Prevention must address not only individual factors that can promote risk (such as loneliness, substance use and low self esteem), but also the situational factors that make safer sex difficult.

*“I think it's all - oppression, it's oppression. I think racism, sexism and homophobia or HIV phobia, they're all lack of education or lack of knowledge... it's made me very aware that I want to be involved in trying to make a difference at some sort of level.”*

*“I have a father who said ‘I prefer to have a son who is a murderer than a son who is a maricón.’”*

*“(When I use speed) I don't feel sorry about my situation, I mean, about being gay or anything like that. It like makes me worry less about things. I stop thinking about my family, about my debts in Mexico, about the 15 of us who live together, about work, about the pressure.”*

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## **Taking a closer look at CHALLENGES TO BEING SAFE**

Let's take a closer look at other aspects that make safer sex challenging for Latino gay men. Answers lie in the following areas covered in more detail below:

- Beliefs about intimacy
- “Machismo” & male sexuality
- Substance use

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## **Beliefs about INTIMACY**

The use of condoms within intimate relationships can be extremely difficult for some Latino gay men. Protecting oneself by using a condom because a loved one could be “dangerous” to oneself goes against ideas about love and romance that emphasize trust and self giving.

*“If I'm having sex with somebody and I've got a condom on, it's like I'm not really having sex with them. I just don't feel that good...I'm not just out having sex to have sex. When I'm with somebody it's because there's something about them that I like.”*

*“You're putting each other's lives in each other's hands. What's the biggest demonstration of love between a couple? ‘I'll die for you, will you die for me?’ I trust you, will you trust me?”*

## “MACHISMO” and male sexuality

The idealization of the “macho” male in Latino cultures is oppressive for many Latino gay men and may play a role in unprotected sex. Many Latino gay men grow up feeling inadequate or less than a man because “machismo” sees homosexuals as inferior. Compensating for a sense of “failed masculinity” may play a role in unprotected sexual practices, when men try to feel powerful rather than vulnerable in a sexual situation. The belief that Latino gay males cannot control their sexuality once they are aroused can also get in the way of safer sexual practices.

*“It’s usually the female who will say no or put a stop to it [sex]...But out in the world, you get two guys together, and it’s just like let’s do it. Whereas the heterosexual, generally, I’m not saying all of the time, but usually the woman will put a stop to it, say no...”*

*“It’s like the heat of the moment, you get lost in that, you just want to do it all right there and then. And the last thing, in the back of your mind, it’s like you need to be safe.”*

## ALCOHOL, METHAMPHETAMINE, and other substance use

Many Latino gay men rely on alcohol and drugs to cope with the stresses of poverty and discrimination. As we know, the influence of drugs and or alcohol makes it difficult to practice safer sex. The majority of Latino gay men report drinking some alcohol. One in five drink alcohol more than two times a week. The heaviest drinkers have the highest risk for HIV.

Recent studies show a strong relationship between the use of stimulants (methamphetamine, cocaine or crack) and the risk for HIV transmission. In a study of Latino gay men who use methamphetamine in San Francisco, about three out of four said they had unprotected anal intercourse at least once in the last six months. About one third of these men are HIV-positive.

US born Latino gay men are more likely to use drugs possibly because of more frequent participation in US mainstream gay culture. Latino immigrant men may face new challenges in HIV prevention as they become more integrated and more acculturated to US society.

*“(On speed) I become even more hardcore. Sexual risks and inhibitions are totally gone. I become empowered in, feeling like I can take on the world or anyone that fucked with me. It can be a euphoric rush.”*

*“(Sex on speed) It throws all of your reasoning and logic out the window. While you are doing anything, it just makes you feel invincible, like you can get away with it.”*

*“(On speed) It lets all your fears go away and so you don’t use condoms and maybe the sex, the sex is a little rougher and a little more dangerous”*

## What helps Latino gay men be STRONG, SAFE AND HEALTHY?

Six main factors describe what has helped Latino gay men cope with life’s difficulties.

- Being accepted by family
- Feeling socially connected (family and friends)
- Having a satisfying sex life
- Being involved in community activities
- Engaging in social activism
- Having a gay role model

All these reduce social isolation and increase self esteem. Latino gay men with these factors in their lives are less likely to have mental health problems, abuse substances or be at risk for HIV.

*“I got involved because coming to the Bay Area, I wanted to be part of a group. I wanted to be involved with a community, with my community, not just with the Latino community, but with the gay Latino community, because there’s a big difference and it’s a whole different ball game, and I wanted to be involved because I just wanted to help out and I had spare time and I wanted to meet people, do things”*

## Building upon Latino gay men's INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE STRENGTHS

Community health practices and research findings help us understand what puts Latino gay men at risk for HIV. To address this risk, we must understand Latino gay men's history of social discrimination and its impact. We must also honor and build upon Latino gay men's individual and collective strengths.

**Speaking out against social discrimination** leads to a more just and healthy society. This is perhaps the most important tool we have to fight diseases like AIDS that thrive on social injustice. As a part of ending social discrimination, community based interventions can prevent HIV among Latino gay men. Interventions can bring individuals together, reduce mental health problems and increase awareness.

HIV prevention and education should **focus on situations that make it difficult to practice safer sex**. Prevention interventions can help Latino gay men discover and understand the situations that increase the risk of HIV. As Latino gay men become more aware of their history of social discrimination and how that affects HIV risk, they will be more empowered to develop and implement their own strategies to manage difficult situations.

For Latino gay men, any successful intervention must **provide a place of social acceptance and connection**, where they can be themselves, where they can take off the social masks and **break the silence** that has hurt them so much and for too long. By being welcomed and accepted, Latino gay men can renew their strength and commitment to deal with the devastating effects of the HIV epidemic. They can create strategies to protect themselves and one another as an expression of community building and mutual care. In this way, Latino gay men's safer sex choices will be motivated by the awareness that they are creating a better and more just world for themselves and generations to follow.

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information about this  
or other topics visit*

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