

“SOMETIMES IT’S PAINFUL”: PAINFUL ANAL INTERCOURSE AND SEXUAL DECISION MAKING AMONG BLACK MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN SOUTH AFRICAN TOWNSHIPS

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KEY MESSAGES

- Black South African MSM report occasionally experiencing receptive anal intercourse that is painful or that results in tearing or bleeding of anal tissue.
- Some are already taking steps to prevent pain during receptive anal intercourse.
- HIV prevention initiatives targeting MSM can build on this foundation by expanding access to water-based lubricants and educating MSM about safe and pleasurable ways to engage in anal sex.

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BACKGROUND

- Little is known about pain during consensual anal intercourse and its relationship to HIV risk and protective behaviors among men who have sex with men (MSM).
- Water-based lubricant may be an important tool for making receptive anal intercourse safer and more comfortable, but research suggests that MSM in Africa have relatively limited access to water-based lubricant.
- The purpose of this study was to characterize the role of painful anal intercourse in the sexual decision making of Black MSM residing in South African townships.

METHODS

Participants

- 81 Black males from 4 townships in Tshwane, South Africa
- Age range 20 to 39 years; *M* = 25.16 years
- Engaging in oral, anal, or masturbatory sex with at least one other male in the preceding year was an eligibility criterion
- Most participants engaged in either insertive or receptive anal intercourse exclusively.

Procedures

- Semi-structured, in-depth interviews
- Interview topics: sexual behavior and identity, alcohol use, and safer sex practices
- Participants discussed pain during anal intercourse without specific prompting from the interviewer, in response to questions about sexual practices.

Analysis

- Using ATLAS.ti software, transcripts were first coded with a set of concept-driven codes related to the overall study’s research questions and then with data-driven codes related to pain during anal intercourse.
- Analysis was limited to descriptions of consensual sexual encounters.

RESULTS

Some participants reported experiencing pain during receptive anal intercourse; in some cases this was accompanied by tearing or bleeding of anal tissue.

Painful receptive anal intercourse was commonly attributed to:

- Partner’s lack of same-sex sexual experience
- Partner’s penis size
- Lack of lubrication
- Uncomfortable sexual positions or acts
- Prolonged or rough sexual encounters
- Alcohol use or non-use (by participant or participant’s partner)

Responses to painful anal intercourse included:

- *Alcohol use* to prevent pain
- *Setting sexual boundaries*, for example:
 - Abstaining from anal intercourse
 - Engaging in non-penetrative sex with certain partners
 - Having rules about sex acts or sexual positions one would or would not perform
- *Using lubricants* during anal intercourse, such as:
 - Commercially available water-based lubricants
 - Oil-based products (jojoba oil, baby oil, Vaseline)
 - Saliva
 - Yogurt

Although the use of lubricants during anal intercourse was commonly reported, participants also report that lubricants are more difficult to obtain than condoms.

Lubricants are sold only in pharmacies and adult shops, and are rarely distributed for free.

Attributions for Painful Anal Intercourse

“If [his penis is] big it will be painful, if it’s medium then it won’t be painful, and if it’s small, it won’t be painful. If it’s too big, I will feel pain and may bleed; sometimes it’s difficult to go to the toilet.”

“I had this guy, a friend of mine, we didn’t use lubricants, so it was painful... He was so rough, and then like he didn’t listen to what I wanted in bed. He was so controlling to me and he wanted whatever he wanted.”

“When you are sober it’s different because you can see everything that you are doing. When a guy is too rough, you can feel the pain and ask him to stop. When you are drunk everything goes, but that does not happen with me; if I don’t want something then I don’t want it, but as for a guy being rough or how he put it in, it doesn’t matter. Sometimes you find that I ask the guy to come closer because I can’t feel him.”

“Sometimes you forget to use a condom or sometimes you forget to use a lubricant, because if you are under influence of alcohol you can’t feel the pains mostly. You feel them tomorrow.”

Responses to Painful Anal Intercourse

“I tell him what I like...I also give him a chance to tell me what he wants, and if ever he wants doggy style I will tell him I can’t, and if he says he will be gentle I tell him that either way it’s painful. So I will tell him to think of something. If he can’t, I will tell him to sleep.”

“It depends how big it is...The penis. And you tell yourself, ‘this will not enter me,’ and to avoid that you negotiate and you tell him you want thigh sex or whatever. But sometimes it’s big but he is gentle and we use lubricants and he can penetrate you and there is no pain. It depends on the guy whether it he is rough or gentle. If he is rough, you can tell him that he is too rough and you can try a second option.”

“Sometimes it happens that you hang out with friends and you meet with someone and you start kissing and it happens that you forgot the lubricant and the guy wants to have sex without the lubricant and I tell the guy I don’t want something like that.”

CONCLUSIONS

- HIV prevention efforts targeting South African MSM should include psychosexual education about safe and pleasurable ways to practice anal intercourse.
- MSM should be supported in adopting sexual practices and sexual negotiation techniques that may protect them from painful anal intercourse, sexual violence, HIV transmission, and other negative health outcomes.
- Improving access to water-based lubricants remains an important component of HIV prevention interventions for this population.

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