

Effective Behavioral Interventions for Reducing HIV Risk and Transmission

The goal of behavioral interventions is to reduce the risk of HIV-related sexual and drug-use behaviors. Specifically, interventions seek to delay the onset of sexual intercourse, reduce the number of sexual partners a person has, reduce the incidence of unprotected sex by increasing condom use, and reduce or eliminate the incidence of drug injecting and the incidence of sharing needles, syringes, and other drug-use equipment. True reductions in such behavioral risks—particularly if adopted widely and sustained over time—translate into decreased transmission and acquisition of HIV.

Since the early 1980s, hundreds of studies of behavior-change interventions focused on different population groups—including heterosexual adults and adolescents, injecting drug users, and men who have sex with men—have been conducted. Several systematic reviews and meta-analyses (which combine findings from multiple studies) have found that such interventions can result in significant reductions in risk behaviors among different population groups over periods ranging from three months to two years. Some behavioral interventions also have demonstrated reductions in incidence of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).¹

On the basis of peer-reviewed publications through 2004, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified 42 prevention interventions demonstrated to be efficacious in well-designed studies. In each of these studies, trial participants in the intervention (experimental) arm exhibited significant reductions in HIV risk behaviors compared with participants in the control group or comparison condition.² A number of these interventions are now being disseminated and adopted widely by community-based organizations throughout the U.S., including the following examples.

Individual and Small-Group Interventions

“light”: Living in Good Health Together, the NIMH Multisite HIV Prevention Trial

Small-group intervention aimed at decreasing unprotected sex and increasing condom use among women and men at STI clinics and low-income women at neighborhood health care clinics. Participants in the intervention group reported reducing the number of unprotected intercourse acts by 50%, increasing condom use by 40%, and increasing consistency of condom use or abstinence by over 40%.³

Street Smart: Reducing HIV Risk Among Runaway and Homeless Youths

Multi-session, skills-building program designed to help groups of runaway youth reduce unprotected sex, number of sex partners, and substance use. Young people participating in the intervention reduced their substance

use and number of unprotected sex acts compared with participants in the control group. Young women reported greater reductions in substance use and unprotected sex than did young men, and African American youth reported greater reductions in substance use than did youth of other ethnic groups.⁴

Project RESPECT: Two Models of Effective, Individual, Client-focused HIV Prevention Counseling Interventions

Two one-on-one, client-focused HIV prevention counseling interventions, “brief counseling” (two sessions) and “enhanced counseling” (four sessions), which seek to reduce high-risk sexual behaviors and prevent new STIs. Compared with participants in the comparison condition, men and women in both interventions reported significantly greater condom use and reduction of risk behaviors and had fewer new STIs.⁵

VOICES/VOCES: Video Opportunities for Innovative Condom Education and Safer Sex

A single-session, video-based HIV/STI prevention program (in English and Spanish) designed to encourage condom use and improve condom negotiation skills. Participants in the intervention group had increased knowledge about HIV and STI transmission, a more realistic assessment of their personal risk, greater likelihood of getting condoms and intending to use them regularly, and fewer repeat STIs.⁶

SISTA: Sisters Informing Sisters on Topics about AIDS, A Peer-Led Program to Prevent HIV Infection in African American Women

A small-group, social-skills-training intervention for African American women to increase consistent condom use and improve sexual communication skills. Intervention participants demonstrated increased consistent condom use, sexual behavior self-control, sexual communication, and sexual assertiveness skills compared with the control group. Partners of participants in the intervention group were more likely to adopt and support consistent condom use.⁷

Community-Level Interventions

Mpowerment Project: A Community-Level HIV Prevention Intervention for Young Gay Men

A community-building intervention designed to reduce frequency of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) among young gay and bisexual men, based on empowering young men to promote safer sex in their communities through peer outreach and social marketing. The intervention resulted in a 14% reduction in reported UAI with primary partners and an 11% reduction in UAI with men in general among participants in the intervention group compared with those in the control group.⁸

Popular Opinion Leader (POL): A Community AIDS/HIV Risk Reduction Program for Gay Men

Trains community leaders to promote risk reduction among gay men in their communities, chiefly patrons of gay bars. Among intervention partici-

pants, UAI decreased between 15% and 24% in the three cities in which it was tested. Intervention participants also increased their condom use and decreased their number of sex partners. This intervention has been replicated and adapted in many other cities and population groups, including low-income women in housing projects.⁹

Community Promise

A community-level intervention to promote progress toward consistent HIV prevention through community mobilization and distribution of small-media materials and risk-reduction supplies, such as condoms and bleach. Communities where this intervention was implemented showed significant movement by community members toward consistent condom use with main and non-main partners and significantly increased condom-carrying among members of the participants' communities.¹⁰

Prevention for HIV-Positive People

Healthy Relationships: Prevention for Positives

A multi-session, small-group skills-building intervention for women and men living with HIV/AIDS, designed to reduce stress related to safer sexual behaviors and disclosure of serostatus to family, friends, and partners. At six-month follow-up, participants in Healthy Relationships reported significant reductions in the number of unprotected sex acts with non-HIV-positive partners and the overall number of sexual contacts, and more consistent refusal to engage in unsafe sex compared with participants in the control group.¹¹

Partnership for Health: A Brief Safer-Sex Intervention in HIV Clinics

A brief, provider-delivered counseling program for women and men living with HIV/AIDS, aimed at improving patient-provider communication about safer sex, disclosure of serostatus, and HIV prevention. Participants in the intervention who had two or more sex partners or at least one casual partner were significantly less likely to engage in unprotected anal or vaginal sex compared with participants in the control group.¹²

It is estimated that prevention programs such as these averted between 204,000 and 1,585,500 HIV infections between 1978 and 2000.¹³

But HIV prevention funding has declined each year since 2001 (adjusted for inflation), limiting the capacity of public health agencies and community-based organizations to implement proven interventions.

The collective impact of behavioral interventions on HIV incidence will only be observed when such programs are fully implemented and scaled up to reach all populations at risk.

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