

Can we incorporate relationships into HIV prevention among young men?



Primary finding results for ATN 157: We Prevent

A pilot randomized controlled trial of a relationship-focused HIV prevention intervention for young sexual minority men in the United States

It is very important that young people can discuss HIV prevention in their intimate and close relationships, just like everyone else.

Intimate and close relationships are an important part of people's lives. A key aspect of relationships is openly communicating about personal preferences and sexual desires, which also means setting clear boundaries for safer sex practices. This is especially true for young men, who may be entering their first relationships.

Using couples-based HIV testing & counseling to bring relationship talk into HIV prevention.

Couples-based HIV Testing and Counseling (CHTC) supports partners in navigating conversations around their sexual health. CHTC structures a space for partners to learn and practice relationship skills, like conflict navigation and communication.

CHTC aims to support how couples talk about sexual agreements, or what sex looks like in and out of the relationship, which can include things like:

- Being polyamorous, open, or monogamous,
- Types of sex allowed, and
- HIV prevention methods used.

Research has shown that sexual agreements may be highly effective at reducing the chance of HIV transmission between partners, while also improving their health and wellbeing.

There are many HIV prevention interventions but few of these programs specifically focus on young sexual minority men in intimate relationships.

How was We Prevent developed?

In 2017, researchers developed the We Prevent intervention with the guidance of experts and youth stakeholders to make sure that content would meet young men's needs more appropriately. With their feedback, We Prevent was designed to be a 1-on-1 intervention with a counselor over video conferencing, either with a partner or individually.

This study aimed to see how young sexual minority men in relationships responded to We Prevent program versus standard HIV counseling. More specifically, they wanted to know if We Prevent could:

- Reduce rates of sexual HIV transmission
- Encourage formation of sexual agreements, and
- Be a positive experience for young men.

We Prevent Study Process

The following describes the process for people who got the We Prevent intervention:



Mailed at-home HIV self-testing kit



Video conferenced with counselor to take HIV self-test



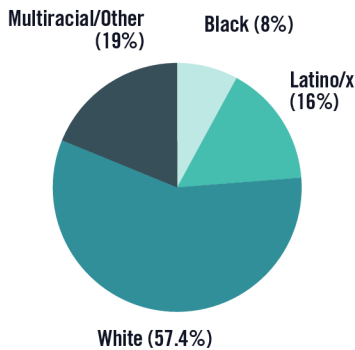
While waiting for results, counselors talked about topics like:

- Communication strategies
- Sexual agreements
- Strengths & challenges of current relationship(s)
- Differences in past & present relationships

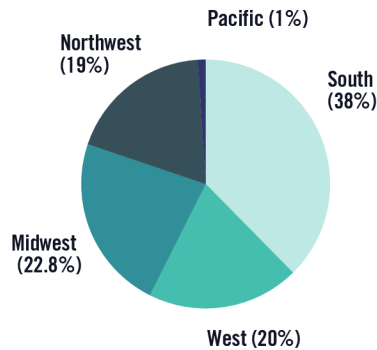
Who participated in We Prevent?

From December 2019 to September 2020, the study team recruited 318 young sexual minority men in relationships through advertisement on social networks like Facebook and Instagram, in addition to referrals from the Annual American Men's Internet Survey.

Racial Identity



Geographic Region



All of the participants were in relationships at the start of the study.

43% were in a relationship for more than a year

27% did not have sexual agreements

84% were taking a form of PrEP when they enrolled

61% regularly got an HIV test every 6 months

Most young men who received We Prevent counseling enjoyed it.



were very satisfied with We Prevent



would recommend it to a friend

When interviewed about their experiences with the intervention, people described We Prevent as innovative and positive. Participants also mentioned:

- Liking having neutral third party
- Learning new relationship skills, and
- Wanting more content, such as navigating sex on dating apps.

However, only about half of participants actually finished We Prevent counseling due to confusion caused by participation in similar online studies, little personal contact, and barriers related to the COVID-19 pandemic that made participating difficult.

Participant Testimonies



It felt good, especially at the time I was having some issues. I could have gone to my friends with that but that kind of sets a wedge in the relationship and they might view [my partner] negatively. (*Latinx cisman, 23*)



I learned that setting boundaries about sex is important. Setting those boundaries and clear communication is so important. (*Multiracial cis man, 20*)



I ended up moving out of our school housing and in with my parents and I [...] remember it just like, wanting to do this session and feeling awkward about having this HIV test kit coming to my parents' house because then they're going to be like, 'Well, why do you need to be HIV tested? What's going on?' (*White cis man, 24*)



What did researchers find out?

Among young men who received We Prevent counseling, researchers found that:

- 1 Participants who took part in the We Prevent program reported having **less condomless sex after nine months** compared to those who only received the standard HIV testing.
- 2 Further findings suggested that the program may be particularly effective in **helping reduce condomless sex among younger men aged 15-17 and those in long-term relationships**.
- 3 We Prevent might help **reduce intimate partner violence** for those in long-term relationships.
- 4 **The COVID-19 pandemic made it harder for participants to stay engaged.** Some said they would prefer in-person sessions for more personal interactions and emphasized the need for clearer instructions.

Because of the low number of participants who completed the intervention session, the results should be interpreted with caution. Without more data from participants completing the intervention as intended, it is difficult to attribute any differences in behavior or attitudes to the intervention or just chance.

Key Takeaways

Supporting Relationship Skills

Programs for young sexual minority men that include relationship skills, sexual communication, and boundary setting are crucial for HIV prevention efforts.

Testing in Community Settings

The results of this study suggest that the We Prevent program should be evaluated in community settings to see how well it works and how doable it is for everyone involved, including clients, counselors, and other staff.

Being Flexible is Important

We Prevent was first created for couples to do together. However, after hearing feedback from young men, the program was changed so participants could choose to do it alone or with their partner. Our study shows how important it is to listen to young people and be flexible to meet their needs.

To read more about We Prevent and other studies, you can visit atnconnect.org or follow us @atnresearch.

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