

Study suggests many gay and bisexual men are skeptical, but attitudes are on the rise

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Dr. Jonathon Rendina, an Assistant Professor at Hunter College and Director of Quantitative Methods at Hunter's Center for HIV Educational Studies & Training, and Dr. Jeffrey Parsons, Distinguished Professor at Hunter and Director of CHEST, have published a new paper in the *Journal of the International AIDS Society* focused on gay and bisexual men's perceptions of the HIV treatment-as-prevention message, "Undetectable = Untransmittable." Numerous well-controlled trials have recently demonstrated that there is effectively no risk of HIV transmission during sex with a partner who has a sustained, undetectable viral load. This notion, that HIV treatment can lead to HIV prevention, has been captured with the #UequalsU slogan popularized by Bruce Richman and the Prevention Access Campaign, of which he is Executive Director, and has gained growing popularity and endorsements, including the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Hunter CHEST study sought to examine how accurate gay and bisexual men perceive this message to be by surveying more than 12,000 men across the United States in the summer of 2017.

"Some studies have examined beliefs about treatment-as-prevention generally, though they have largely been done outside of the U.S. and weren't focused on any specific message," said Dr. Rendina, lead author of the paper. Overall, the message was perceived to be accurate by 70% of men who were HIV-positive and 36% of men who were HIV-negative or unsure of their HIV status—though there is some room for improvement, these rates suggest there have been increases since earlier studies. "We found that HIV-negative and unknown guys were more

likely to believe the message was accurate if they got tested for HIV more regularly and if they were taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), suggesting these prevention services may be a great way to gain a captive audience to provide more information about treatment-as-prevention."

In addition to promoting HIV knowledge, one goal of the message is to help reduce HIV stigma. Mr. Richman noted, "This study underscores the great need for further targeted educational and dissemination strategies and provides data that will be immensely valuable as we work with our partners to scale up campaigns to prevent new transmissions and reduce HIV stigma." Among HIV-positive men, reporting a detectable viral load was associated with believing the message was less accurate. Dr. Rendina added, "What we may be seeing is that some guys who aren't able to maintain a sustained undetectable viral load either have lower levels of knowledge potentially due to being less well-retained in care or that they may feel left out of the message and concerned it will lead to additional stigma placed on them." He continued, "There is great promise for the message to reduce HIV stigma, but at the same we need to make sure we don't end up marginalizing or stigmatizing those who struggle with keeping their viral loads undetectable."

Among men with and without HIV, believing the message was more accurate was associated with having had condomless anal sex with a partner of a different HIV status. Dr. Parsons noted, "This suggests that men who understand the scientific evidence, now endorsed by the CDC, that Undetectable = Untransmittable feel more comfortable having condomless sex when a positive partner is virally suppressed. Because they know that treatment-as prevention is effective—as with other forms of biomedical prevention, like PrEP, it's giving men more options regarding their sexual health that emphasize autonomy and sexual pleasure. The message of 'use a condom every time' is now outdated and limiting." Strategies such as regular viral load monitoring, efforts to

maintain medication adherence, routine screening for sexually transmitted infections, better access to PrEP, and promoting communication about biomedical prevention with sexual partners can be helpful in conjunction with treatment-as-[prevention](#) to continue curbing the HIV epidemic and averting new epidemics among other [sexually transmitted infections](#).

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