

**Strategies for with effectiveness is low or uncertain** *The effectiveness of these strategies is low or uncertain and often depends on other factors. Combining them with other strategies is recommended.*



## REFRAINING FROM SEX

**Choosing to refrain from sexual contact on a short-term or long-term basis if the conditions are not optimal for reducing your risks**

### Description

- Sexual abstinence is the choice to forego having sexual contact with other people. Abstinence can be
  - a short-term strategy, e.g. on a night when you're drinking or using drugs, for the duration of treatment for an STI, during a period when your viral load is detectable if you are HIV-positive.
  - a long-term strategy, e.g. during a period of increased risk in your life.
- HIV-positive people, in particular those who have been recently diagnosed, often make use of this strategy. For some HIV-positive men, abstinence removes the stress of disclosing HIV status to sexual partners and makes it possible to avoid rejection.<sup>2</sup> For others, abstinence arises from a lack of desire or interest in sex after getting a diagnosis.<sup>3</sup>

### Effectiveness

- The most effective way to avoid HIV and STI transmission is to abstain from sex.
- The effectiveness of sexual abstinence depends on sticking to this decision. If the choice is not made freely and is a source of frustration, maintaining this strategy can be difficult.
  - For example, in a study on adherence to strategies, the few HIV-negative men who had chosen abstinence as an HIV prevention strategy were not more likely to abstain than those who had not chosen this strategy. However, the majority of people living with HIV who had chosen this strategy stuck to it.<sup>4</sup>

### Acceptability

- In the *Mobilise!* survey among men who have sex with men in Montreal, a majority (90%) of respondents knew about abstinence as a risk reduction strategy.<sup>5</sup>
- In one study, abstinence was chosen by 7% of HIV-positive and 8% of HIV-negative respondents as a main prevention strategy.<sup>4</sup>
- Advantages of abstinence:
  - Offers considerable and effective protection against HIV and STIs if carried out consistently.<sup>6</sup>
  - Reduces concerns about contracting or transmitting HIV or an STI to sexual partners.<sup>6</sup>
  - Can give you a greater sense of empowerment and control over your sexuality and sexual health.
  - Can nonetheless allow for some forms of sexuality, e.g. masturbation<sup>6</sup>, virtual sexuality with a webcam partner.
  - Does not require use of a service.
  - No costs are involved.
- Disadvantages of abstinence:
  - May be difficult to maintain on a day-to-basis and refrain from all sexual contact.<sup>6</sup>
  - May lead to being made fun of or judged by the people around you.<sup>6</sup>
  - May require negotiation with your regular or occasional sexual partners.
  - You may find it boring after a certain time.<sup>6</sup>
  - May cause feelings of sexual dissatisfaction, which in turn can lead to risk-taking.<sup>6</sup>

### References

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