Surfing for Sex
Jonathan Elford, MSc, PhD

Surf 'n sex. Ten years ago you would have had to head to the beach for this cocktail. But not any longer. More people surf the net these days than surf the waves. And many are surfing for sex.

Clearly cybersex—sex that takes place in the “virtual” space of the Internet without direct contact with another person—carries no risk for the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases. But it seems that using the Internet to seek and actually meet sexual partners may present such a risk.

Internet Users
Several studies have found increased levels of high risk behavior among people who seek sex on the Internet. In a Denver study conducted in a public HIV testing clinic, people who sought sex on the Internet were more likely to have had a sexually transmitted disease (STD) or report sexual exposure to a person with HIV than those who did not seek sex on the Internet. They were also more likely to be male and gay, and to report anal sex.

While the study concluded that gay men were more likely than other participants to use the Internet to seek—and meet—sexual partners, it could not establish whether the excess sexual risk actually occurred with partners whom the men had met through the Internet. Nor was there information on the HIV status of the men who were interviewed or their sexual partners. Such information is crucial for assessing the level of risk associated with the unprotected intercourse reported by these men.

A San Francisco study found that gay men were more likely than heterosexual men and women to use the Internet to meet sexual partners. Around one-third of the gay men interviewed at a public STD clinic had used the Internet to meet a sexual partner compared with one-in-ten heterosexual men and women. The gay men in the study said that their online partners—men they met through the Internet—were more likely to be casual (that is, resulting from a one-night stand) than their offline partners—men they met elsewhere.

Similar reports about online dating have also emerged from European studies. In an investigation of gay men in London gyms, more than one-third of those with Internet access had used it to look for casual sex. Among these men, seeking sex on the Internet was associated with a recent STD diagnosis and high-risk sexual behavior. HIV-negative Internet-sex seekers were twice as likely as other men to report unprotected anal intercourse with a person of unknown or discordant HIV status, a finding that was also observed in the San Francisco study. On the other hand, HIV-positive Internet-sex seekers were more likely to engage in unprotected sex with other HIV-positive men. While this practice does not present a risk of HIV transmission to an uninfected person, it may lead to infection with another STD or with another, and potentially drug-resistant, strain of HIV. As in the U.S. studies, the London study did not establish whether the excess risk for HIV and STD occurred with sexual partners whom the men had actually met through the Internet.

Internet Partners
To look at this particular issue, HIV prevention workers in the Netherlands "approached" gay men in Internet chat rooms and asked if they would complete a confidential questionnaire online. The questionnaire asked how many of their last five sexual partners respondents had met online and whether they had had unsafe sex with online partners. “Unsafe sex” was defined as unprotected anal intercourse or receptive oral sex with ejacula-
Editorial: e-Risk?
Robert Marks, Editor

The Internet embodies so many of our hopes and fears. It represents the future and, in this way, some idealized “better place.” In uncovering our discomfort with change, it also evokes the past and raises the fear of losing another better place, the one that we often fantasize happened yesterday but is gone today.

Whether or not we prefer online activities and whether or not their significance for our lives and productivity is as huge as the hype suggests, e-mail and Web browsing have changed the way we do many things that we do much of the time: communicate, work, play.

One activity that the Internet has clearly facilitated is access to sexually explicit material. Searching for, sharing, and selling sexual images comprise the most common of Internet activities. Virtual sex was identified early in the Net days as a risk-free approach to sex, a gift of the information superhighway to public health. While virtual sex has become an outlet for sexual activity, people have not, of course, stopped having face-to-face sex and unprotected sex. In the hype about the frenzy of sex on the Web, we may have forgotten that sex has always suffused our lives, and that at most, the Internet is a tool that may increase access to sex by making contact more convenient.

This issue of FOCUS seeks to understand the real effects of the Internet on sex and, in particular, on risky sex. Jonathan Elford reviews the small, but growing, literature on the relationship between Internet encounters and real-life unprotected sex. Michael Ross discusses the possibility of using the Internet to reach out to people at risk of HIV and deliver online prevention counseling. They conclude that there are both significant associations between the Internet and sexual risk and significant opportunities for online prevention.

To the extent that the Internet facilitates communication, it may also facilitate the negotiation of face-to-face sexual encounters, risky or safer. The ease of Internet communication—where and when you want it—seems preferable to the complex visual language of a singles bar or the cumbersome snail mail procedure of responding to newspaper personal ads. If, for these reasons, Internet chat rooms are places where people who seek unsafe sex may congregate, it also makes them ideal venues for HIV prevention messages. In the same way that chat room participants may take advantage of the Internet to ease sexual communication, so can prevention providers use this medium to influence sexual decision making and multiply the effects of their efforts.

But, despite the fact that the Internet is a new technology, efforts to harness it to encourage safer sex might be stymied by a brick-and-mortar-age assumption: that not talking about sex is the best way to protect people from its risks. Efforts continue to inhibit the access to material that uses the word “sex” and similar words, even when these Web sites are devoted to HIV prevention. While the government has a role to play in protecting people from exploitative sex and nonconsensual sex, a response that limits HIV education from reaching those at risk of infection remains misguided and ultimately self-defeating.

References
Online Prevention

But Internet users are potentially reachable with online HIV prevention messages. A good example of this occurred in San Francisco among public health officials who made creative use of the Internet to trace a syphilis outbreak among gay men who met their sexual partners through online chat rooms. Working closely with a marketing firm that maintained an Internet portal for gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals, the investigators undertook “contact tracing” in cyberspace. They began by interviewing, face-to-face, two men diagnosed with syphilis. Both of these men said they had met most of their sexual partners in an Internet chat room. With the information gleaned from these offline interviews, the investigators posted information about the outbreak in the chat rooms and were able to identify five related cases. The investigators noted that the Internet may offer opportunities for the control of other communicable diseases through the rapid posting of information across a wide geographic area.

The Internet undoubtedly offers enormous potential for sexual health promotion and HIV prevention. The attractions of the Internet include being able to access hard-to-reach population groups, tailor information according to specific need, update material rapidly, and undertake interventions at relatively low cost. Today, HIV outreach workers increasingly visit online chat rooms in the same way that they go to outdoor cruising grounds or other public sex environments. Chat rooms provide a forum for people to discuss HIV, STDs, safer sex, and places to go for screening. Chat room users can also e-mail outreach workers directly or enter into a one-to-one conversation online if they have specific queries. An increasing number of organizations are also placing health promotion material on the World Wide Web and taking full advantage of its interactive potential.

Exciting as these opportunities may appear we still know relatively little about the efficacy of online sexual health promotion and HIV prevention. We do know something about the barriers however. In an online survey of nearly 5,000 people in the United States, less than one-third of respondents said they would take part in a chat room discussion about STD and HIV prevention. However, nearly half said they would open an unsolicited e-mail message about STD and HIV prevention, while about two-thirds said they would be willing to visit an STD- and HIV-related web site. Men who have sex with men and people with a history of testing for STDs responded more favorably to the idea of online STD and HIV prevention than other people. These findings highlight the fact that Internet-based HIV and STD prevention may be valuable for some people—but not for all.

Conclusion

On the one hand, seeking sex through the Internet seems to be associated with an increased risk for HIV and STD transmission. On the other hand, the Internet offers new and exciting opportunities for HIV and STD prevention. It is impossible to say at this stage which way the balance will tip—whether the Internet ultimately increases risk behavior more than it prevents disease or vice versa. While it is the mantra of all academics that further research is needed, on this occasion this is justified. The Internet is still in its infancy even though people use it for that most adult of activities—seeking sex.

Consequently our knowledge about surfing and sex is rudimentary.

Over the next two years, research in London will focus on gay men who seek sex through the Internet: how their risk-taking with Internet partners compares with risks with other men; whether gay men intentionally seek unprotected anal sex through the Internet; and what is the potential for harnessing the Internet for STD and HIV prevention. It will also examine cause and effect. Does the nature of online dating somehow prompt an increase in high-risk behavior, or do individuals with a high-risk profile tend to seek sex through the Internet more than other men? Along with research undertaken elsewhere in Europe and the United States, this study will begin to map the complexities of this new risk—but potentially health-promoting—environment.

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The Internet as a Medium for HIV Prevention and Counseling
Michael W. Ross, PhD, MPH, MPHEd

It is estimated that the largest component of Internet use in the United States is sexual. On any given weekday afternoon, for example, there are approximately 10,000 people signed into sexual chat rooms on gay.com. The number participating during the evening hours and weekends is much higher. These chat rooms have become a popular venue for men who have sex with men to meet and engage in virtual sex, and to arrange real world sexual assignments.

The Internet is gaining attention not only as a venue for making sexual contacts, but also as one for contact tracing and HIV prevention. Given the statistics on the broad use of the medium, HIV and STD prevention on the Internet has the potential to reach large numbers of men and women who are sexually active.

Since research on sexual contacts via the Internet is still relatively new, there are significant questions regarding the prevalence of Internet sexual contact—both virtual contacts and those that lead to actual encounters—the characteristics of individuals who engage in Internet contact, and the level and distribution of sexual risk behaviors associated with Internet-derived sexual encounters. In addition, new questions arise regarding the acceptability, level of use, and efficacy of HIV and STD prevention materials on the Internet and their impact on reported sexual behaviors.

Internet Counseling

In a summary and evaluation of possibilities for HIV education and counseling on the Internet, researchers from the University of Texas concluded that existing technology is capable of implementing online HIV prevention interventions, including counseling, and evaluating them.¹ A University of Texas review of the suggestions for Internet education and counseling by 16 AIDS educators and counselors noted general support for such a system but also suggested that the lack of verbal and visual cues could undermine counseling efficacy. The researchers noted the following major advantages of the Internet: increased anonymity, increased confidentiality, improved access to geographically and psychologically isolated individuals, and expanded possibilities of delivering tailored and targeted interventions.

Internet-based intervention is consistent with the theories that govern the diffusion of a technological innovation.² These theories hold that prevention is most effective if it takes advantage of the natural ways in which healthy norms spread among individuals in a community, and the characteristics of Internet-based intervention makes it an ideal innovation for the sexual arena. Compared with face-to-face approaches, Internet interventions offer greater temporal and geographic flexibility, lower complexity of access, greater cost-efficiency, significantly improved anonymity, low risk of personal exposure, and significant compatibility with the existing culture and practices of gay, sexually questioning, and young people. These characteristics, along with the effectiveness of the Internet in creating a network that facilitates the types of social exchange that allows people to create community, make it an ideal medium for individuals who identify as part of a sexual minority or are questioning their identity.

One of the characteristics of the Inter-

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Power equality on the Internet is enhanced because the system is based on verbal discourse rather than visual cues.

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ethnicity and culture suggests that acculturation can significantly impact the health behaviors of people who are in sexual minority groups. A case can be made that men who have sex with men and who seek sex on the Internet may be less acculturated into the gay subculture than other men who have sex with men. Again, Swedish research supports such a conclusion: data suggest that Internet-using participants may be less acculturated into the gay subculture because of age, distance from gay centers, and bisexuality.

Alternatively, the case could also be made that a “virtual” equivalent of an “actual” gay subculture may exist on the Internet. This virtual subculture allows participants to access and observe gay interactions in a stress-free environment, at their own pace, and without pressure. In addition, the Internet may offer positive opportunities for diffusion of information to men who have sex with men who are distant in time or place from gay satellite cultures.

The University of Texas analysis of HIV education and counseling on the Internet concluded not only that online HIV prevention is possible, but also that it would have advantages not available to conventional counseling and information services. In addition to the advantages mentioned above—anonymity and increased comfort with disclosure, ease of availability in terms of time and place, greater control by the client, and relevance to a youth culture—the analysis identified several other advantages that were particularly important to gay men in isolated communities. Among these were: the ability to download relevant materials, the possibility of participating in chat-group sessions, the exposure to a range of specialist referrals, the ability to complement existing support, and the increased perception of safety from exposure and stigmatization on the part of clients.

**Conclusion**

The Internet offers some unique possibilities to extend the range of HIV prevention interventions, including counseling and provision of information, to populations whose access has been hindered by geographical, temporal, or psychological obstacles. Despite the loss of visual and oral cues available to counselors, the Internet offers a potentially exciting opportunity to extend the provision of services to a largely inaccessible population on a scale that would have been almost impossible for traditional face-to-face approaches. Specifically, the Internet offers an opportunity to position a specific level of counseling that combines information, tailored intervention material, and specific suggestions, support, and encouragement, rather than the more traditional psychotherapeutic approach.

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Online Social Practices
Whitty M, Gavin J. Age/sex/location: Uncovering the social cues in the development of online relationships. CyberPsychology and Behavior. 2001; 5(4): 623-630. (University of Western Sydney, Australia.)

An Australian study of 60 undergraduate students found that while online relationships are defined by the same values of traditional relationships, such as trust, honesty, and commitment, the cues for these values are different. Primary among these was the positive effect of “visual anonymity.”

Trained students interviewed friends over the age of 17 who were regular users of the Internet about the modes of Internet communication they used, the types of relationships they formed, the conversations they engaged in, their level of honesty, and how Internet relationships compared to offline relationships. Of the 60 interviewees, 28 were men and 32 were women. Their ages ranged from 17 years old to 51 years old, with a mean age of 23 years old.

Online relationships seemed to progress with increased levels of trust and commitment from the least intimate to the most intimate form: from chat room discussions, to e-mail messages, to telephone conversations, to face-to-face encounters. The expectation of eventual face-to-face communication was an important part of the conversational background for both the men and women. Several of the participants believed that over time, the Internet would eventually become obsolete as a mode of communication in these relationships.

Many of the male interviewees saw the Internet as a liberating medium, affording them the freedom to be themselves. The absence of traditionally valued conditions such as physical proximity, information about physical appearance, and other nonverbal cues encouraged and enhanced online relationships, especially for young men.

Men and women alike reported a perceived lack of honesty with the increased anonymity of computer-mediated communication. Women tended to lie for reasons of safety, whereas men lied in order to maintain a “sense of space” and anonymity. However, participants reported that these “white lies” eventually led to deeper self-revelation that was more truthful than it might have otherwise been face-to-face.

Although face-to-face encounters were an important expectation for participants committed to online relationships, these encounters were sometimes unsatisfactory. Women, in particular, preferred to maintain purely online relationships.

Cybersex and Mental Health

An anonymous online survey, administered through the MSNBC web site, found that while 92 percent of respondents did not spend an excessive (more than 11 hours per week) amount of time online for sexual pursuits, there was a correlation between time online for sexual pursuits and levels of distress, sexual compulsion, and sensation seeking.

The 1998 59-item questionnaire, surveying demographic information and details about sexual behavior on and offline, resulted in 9,177 complete and usable responses. Male respondents outnumbered female respondents by a ratio of six to one.

Men were more likely to prefer web sites featuring visual erotica (50 percent for men compared to 23 percent for women), which they frequently downloaded. Women favored chat rooms (49 percent women to 23 percent men), and 51 percent of women had never downloaded sexual material. This suggests that online, women prefer interaction and the development of relationships over visual stimuli.

The sample was divided into three groups based on time online for sexual pursuits: low users (less than one hour a week), moderate users (one to 10 hours a week), and heavy users (more than 10 hours a week). Forty-seven percent were classified as low users and 45 percent as moderate users. Sixty-eight percent of respondents said that online behavior did not interfere with any area of their lives, and 79 percent said that it did not jeopardize any area of their lives. The heavy use group reported a higher frequency than other groups of online sexual material interfering with or jeopardizing important aspects of their lives. The participation in sexual chat rooms and news groups, which both men and women chose as the most powerful and

The study found a correlation between time spent online for sexual pursuits and levels of distress, sexual compulsion, and sensation seeking.
problematic types of interaction, increased with time online for sexual pursuits.

**Internet Sex and HIV Risk**

Bull SS, McFarlane M. Soliciting sex on the Internet: What are the risks for sexually transmitted diseases and HIV? Sexually Transmitted Diseases. 2000; 27(9): 545–550. (Denver Public Health and Hospital Authority; and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.)

Participant observations of 175 chat rooms targeting men who have sex with men, heterosexuals, and couples seeking sex partners determined that the Internet has a greater and more instantaneous reach than any other medium to facilitate encounters that result in sexual activity. They are a popular alternative to gay bars and bathhouses for men who have sex with men to solicit sex partners.

Researchers observed gay sites, sites for swingers or people interested in group sex, and sites for heterosexuals interested in meeting partners, all hosted by America Online (AOL) and other Internet service providers. Three researchers, who remained uninvolved in the chat, observed the sites. They gathered demographic data about chatters from personal profiles and chat text.

Based on data from participants who revealed their ages, most of the chatters were young (44 percent were aged 30 or younger) or middle-aged (26 percent were aged 31 to 45). Personal profiles were most frequently used to reveal likes and dislikes, including risk-related information, types of sexual activities preferred, and geographic location, which was important in terms of facilitating a meeting.

Chat room discussions documented evidence of concern for safe sex behavior through the mention of condoms, abstinence, and labels such as “disease and drug free.” However, desire for higher risk behaviors was also common, for example, anal sex (26 percent of all observations) and multiple partners (21 percent of observations in swinger rooms).

The data suggest that rooms targeting specific groups, such as men who have sex with men or swingers, are more likely to offer evidence of sexually risky behavior and of increased opportunities to meet through online contact.

**Bug Chasing on the Internet**


According to an online study, the recent rise of the Internet as a link among individuals interested in sexual experimentation has facilitated both “barebacking” that is, unprotected sex, and “bug chasing,” the term used to describe barebacking when an HIV-negative gay man seeks to become HIV-infected.

Researchers reviewed the literature and observed web sites, chat rooms, e-mail lists, and personal ads devoted to barebacking. Because of the anonymity of the Internet and the exploratory nature of the study, the number and demographic characteristics of participants is unknown.

The study found that many HIV-positive men consider bareback sex with other HIV-positive men to be completely acceptable, despite risks of coinfection with other strains of HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases. Although some barebackers acknowledged the risks to themselves and others, they continued to participate in unprotected sex. Bug chasing seems to be attractive to HIV-negative people for several reasons: it relieves the fear of infection by achieving “the great inevitable,” it erotizes sex through the danger of HIV, seroconversion replaces loneliness with group solidarity, particularly because HIV-positive people have become revered as heroes and are the focus of community sympathy, and unprotected anal sex is perceived as a political right and action.

Next Month

In December, the demise of Larry Kramer was reported and then retracted by the Associated Press as the New York AIDS activist and pioneer rose from the dead—with a new liver. The event shed light on a growing phenomenon among people with HIV: organ failure. HIV-related organ failure is not new, but it is a byproduct of HIV antiviral treatment advances.

In the May issue of FOCUS, Laurie Carlson, MSN, Study Coordinator of a University of California San Francisco (UCSF) trial on organ transplants in people with HIV, discusses the psychosocial issues that arise for people with HIV before, during, and after liver and kidney transplantation. Also in the May issue, Michelle Roland, MD, Assistant Professor of Medicine at UCSF and the study’s Co-Principal Investigator, describes the process of transplantation and the specific challenges of HIV-related transplants.
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