Research Update

In a relatively short time, the Internet has become a major societal influence. According to recent estimates, there are 166 million Internet users in the United States and Canada, representing 60 percent of the population, and 220 million English speakers with Internet access, representing 43 percent of the world’s online population.

Research indicates that sex is the most frequently searched topic on the Internet, and as many as one-third of all Internet users visit some type of sexual site. Among the ways the Internet can be used for sexual purposes are: accessing sex education; shopping for sexually related products; seeking material, such as erotic pictures or discussion groups, for online entertainment or masturbatory purposes; seeking sex therapists; engaging in “cybersex,” that is, erotic communication with other Internet users; seeking sex workers; and seeking partners for physical sexual encounters through chat rooms, bulletin boards, or online dating services.

This issue of PERSPECTIVES discusses some of the ways Internet use may affect sexual behaviors and HIV risk taking as well as the availability and effectiveness of online HIV prevention and education resources.

Cybersex

Internet communication by its nature provides an anonymous environment in which other people need not know anything about the user other than the information he or she divulges. Because of this, people can control how they present themselves, and may adopt personalities different from the ones they exhibit in the offline world. Common perceptions of online communication are somewhat contradictory: while the Internet seems to epitomize the alienation of the modern world, it also can lead to the development of supportive and intimate relationships.

There is no sensory interaction involved in online communication, except for the occasional exchange of personal photographs, which may or may not accurately represent the individual. Because online interaction consists mainly of exchanging text messages that do not convey many of the inflections and other cues inherent in face-to-face or even telephone conversations, the Internet can foster superficial erotic relationships that
may cause people to act compulsively and place themselves in risky situations. However, the Internet can also provide a safe environment for inexperienced people to experiment with flirtation and different sex roles, encourage honest and intimate communication, and enhance erotic connection by focusing on emotional rather than physical aspects of sexuality.4

The Internet offers exposure to virtually every variety of sexual activity, allowing people to learn about these behaviors and why others enjoy them. The Internet may facilitate the search for others who share similar sexual interests, the process of sexual self-acceptance, and the opportunity to experiment with new behaviors online before deciding to try them in real life.4

Using the Internet for cybersex may also be a psychological defense for people who are not comfortable with their sexuality. For example, a person may believe that expressing homosexual desires online is merely a “virtual” sexual act and is, therefore, not “really” homosexual.5

Although cybersex alone is safe in the context of infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), there is a possibility of cybersex relationships evolving into physical sexual encounters with online partners. In addition, when people act out unsafe sexual scenarios online, they may be more likely to engage in the same unsafe behaviors during physical encounters offline because they have created a “sexual script” that they have already “rehearsed.”5

Meeting Sex Partners Online

In recent years, meeting people online for dating has become increasingly popular and socially acceptable. For many people, the Internet has taken the place of the singles bar. Although some people meet online with no intention of any other interaction, chat room or e-mail encounters can escalate into intense and passionate relationships that sometimes lead to physical meetings resulting in sex.3

In a study of heterosexual chat rooms in the United States, 57 percent of participants reported that they had met someone in person with whom they became involved as a result of meeting in a chat room.5 Preliminary data from a survey of risk behaviors among 3,248 male Internet users found that men who have sex with men were seven times more likely than others to have met sex partners online.6

Internet postings seeking sex are not very different from personal advertisements in newspapers or magazines, but the potential for nearly instant and anonymous interaction with a large number of people who have similar interests enhances the effectiveness of the Internet as a sex-seeking medium. The immediacy of the Internet allows for an online encounter to quickly develop into a physical encounter, and there is often less time to reconsider such a meeting than with an advertisement in a print publication.7

Many people consider electronic communication to be the easiest, most accessible, and most disinhibiting way to meet potential new sex partners. Disinhibition is an especially important factor; because of its effect, people tend to open up emotionally more quickly online than offline. The perception of trust, intimacy, and acceptance may encourage people to use these relationships as primary sources for companionship and comfort. Related to this, the Internet’s cultural climate of permissiveness may encourage and validate sexually adventurous behavior.3

Because it is anonymous and private, especially as compared to bars, bathhouses, and other public sex environments, the Internet may be an appealing medium for people seeking same-sex encounters who do not openly identify as gay or bisexual, as well as for adolescents who prefer to hide sexual activity from parents or peers. Another advantage in many areas is that, unlike public sex venues, the Internet is legal and poses a lower risk of exposure and stigmatization. The Internet is especially effective for finding real-life sex by allowing a large number of potential sex partners to be screened in a relatively short time.5

HIV Transmission and the Internet

Because the Internet provides a faster way to facilitate sexual encounters than many other media, this may result in more efficient transmission of HIV and other STDs. On the other hand, the Internet may also provide more opportunities for sexual negotiation and disclosure of infection with HIV and other STDs than face-to-face encounters, and there are many people online who attempt to take precautions in screening partners by seeking those who are “drug- and disease-free.” However, this does not necessarily mean that these people implement risk-reduction measures when they meet.5

Although there is not a large body of research examining the effects of Internet use on HIV risks, there are studies that indicate higher rates of infection with HIV and other STDs among people who meet sex partners online. A study of 856 clients of a Denver HIV counseling and testing site found that participants who reported
seeking sex on the Internet were more likely to report risk factors for HIV and other STDs than those who did not seek sex on the Internet. Participants who sought sex on the Internet (“online seekers”)—16 percent of the sample—were more likely to have had an STD than those who did not seek sex on the Internet (“offline group”). Online seekers also reported greater numbers of lifetime sex partners than the offline group, but they were more likely to have used a condom during their last sex act. Only 15 percent of the offline group reported having sex with a partner known to be HIV-positive, while 29 percent of online seekers reported such exposure. Sixty-five percent of online seekers succeeded in initiating sexual contact with partners they met online, and 35 percent of these reported having sex with an online partner know to be HIV-positive. Only 44 percent of online seekers reported using a condom during their last sexual encounter with an Internet sex partner.9

In a recent study of gay men who use London gyms, 34 percent of participants with Internet access met sex partners online, and most of these did so on more than one occasion. This included 41 percent of HIV-positive men, 34 percent of HIV-negative men, and 30 percent of men who had not tested for HIV antibodies. Among HIV-negative men, 23 percent of those who met sex partners online reported engaging in unprotected sex with partners who were HIV-positive or of unknown serostatus, compared with 12 percent of those who did not use the Internet to meet sex partners. Among HIV-negative men, 27 percent of those who found a sex partner online reported having an STD in the prior year, compared to 18 percent of those who did not seek sex on the Internet. Overall, participants were more likely to have used the Internet for seeking sex than for obtaining information about HIV or sexual health services.10

In a San Francisco study of gay men seeking STD services, 32 percent reported meeting a sex partner on the Internet in the past year. These men were younger, more likely to report sex with an HIV-positive partner in the prior year, and more likely to report sex with non-primary partners in the prior year than participants who did not meet partners online.11

In 1999, the San Francisco Department of Public Health linked an outbreak of syphilis among men who have sex with men to participation in an Internet chat room. A study of this outbreak found that 67 percent of participants with syphilis met their sex partners online, compared with only 19 percent of participants without syphilis.12

Preliminary results from a study of men who have sex with men in San Francisco found that participants with rectal gonorrhea were more likely than those without rectal gonorrhea to have met sex partners through anonymous venues, including the Internet.13

Compulsive Behavior

Online romantic and sexual behavior can provide an effective escape from the stresses of daily life. For some people, sexual gratification may be the primary reason to engage in online sex, but the more potent attraction often develops from the ability to cultivate a fantasy world.3 Some people increasingly rely on the Internet for their social and sexual needs, and this often leads to greater amounts of time spent online at the expense of investing energy into real-world relationships.3 A common societal perception, however, is that relating to other people online is less involving, less rich, and less personal than face-to-face and even telephone communication.5

One group of researchers suggests that there are three distinct categories of people who use the Internet for sexual pursuits: recreational, compulsive, and at-risk users. Recreational users occasionally experiment, satisfy a sexual urge, or search for specific sexual information. Compulsive users exhibit sexually compulsive traits and experience negative consequences as a result. At-risk users do not have a prior history of sexual compulsivity but have experienced some adverse effects related to using the Internet for sex. Because of their lack of prior problems with sexual compulsivity, at-risk users most potently exemplify the seductive power of Internet sex.4

The ability to remain anonymous is a consistently identified factor in excessive Internet use.3 Research suggests that greater use of the Internet may lead to diminished support and happiness and increased depression and loneliness. One speculation about this effect is that people may be substituting weak online relationships for stronger real-life friendships.5

A consequence of increased reliance on the Internet for social and sexual needs may be the use of the Internet to facilitate sexually compulsive behavior. One study found a strong correlation between time spent online for sexual pursuits and measures of sexual compulsivity and distress. The study also found that the 46.6 percent of participants who did not appear to have a problem with online sexual activities reported spending less
than one hour a week engaging in online sexual activities, while the 8.5 percent with the most distress and highest measures of sexual compulsivity reported spending at least 11 hours a week doing so. It is difficult, however, to determine if these correlations indicate a cause-and-effect relationship.

Some researchers and clinicians refer to people who spend an excessive amount of time online as having an “Internet addiction,” but Internet addiction remains a theoretical phenomenon because there has been no research to conclusively indicate that it actually exists. Further, it can be argued that many excessive Internet users are not “Internet addicts”; rather, they may simply use the Internet as a means to fuel other addictions, for example, sexual or gambling addictions. There are case reports, however, of people who appear to be addicted to the Internet itself because they use it for activities in which they could not otherwise engage, such as chat rooms and fantasy gender-role reversal scenarios.

Online Resources

There are many specific web sites offering education on a variety of sexual matters, including sexual dysfunction, safer sex practices, reproduction, abstinence, and STDs. These sites may also have advice columns, discussion groups, and mailing lists. The Internet allows experts to easily share information, and the enormous number of people online allows sex educators to reach large enough audiences to deliver services on even narrow and specialized topics to populations that might otherwise be neglected. The Internet also provides the opportunity to reach audiences who may never before have received information about sexual health. However, the ease of posting on the Internet without any level of quality control or editorial standards results in a glut of misinformation, and it may be difficult for people to recognize which information or advice is accurate.

Search engines are the most common way to find information on the Internet, and people who employ this method using the keywords “sex” or “sexuality” will most likely end up with a list of commercial pornographic sites. The seemingly limitless amount of information available online can make navigating the Internet challenging and, for some people, discouraging.

A 2000 study of searching for sex education on the Internet found that out of six million web pages identified by keyword searches, only 41 pages provided relevant, educational information, and many of these contained subjective, incomplete, or inaccurate content. Other pages consisted of advertisements, personal pages, and organizational position statements. However, a 2002 study found that the quality of health information on the Internet has improved over the past few years.

Some basic guidelines for assessing the reputability and reliability of a web site include the following:

- Identify the authorship, affiliation, and credentials of each page;
- Determine whether or not the page is used as a marketing tool to sell a product;
- Define the web site’s agenda;
- Begin any search by looking at web sites of professional organizations and publications, and follow their links for more information and resources;
- Determine when the information was last updated.

Useful Web Sites

The following web sites are good places to begin searching for HIV-related information:

The Journal of the American Medical Association HIV/AIDS Resource Center
http://www.ama-assn.org/special/hiv

AEGIS: AIDS Education Global Information System
http://www.aegis.com

CDC—Divisions of HIV/AIDS Prevention (DHAP)
http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/dhap.htm

Avert: AIDS Education and Research Trust
http://www.avert.org

UCSF Center for AIDS Prevention Studies
http://www.caps.ucsf.edu

HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service
http://www.hivatis.org

HIV Insite
http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu

The Body
http://www.thebody.com

San Francisco AIDS Foundation
http://www.sfaf.org
Implications for Counseling

The Internet has become an increasingly common outlet for people to meet sex partners, making it important for HIV counselors to become familiar with the dynamics of online dating. This new medium poses some challenges to HIV prevention, especially because it is an effective avenue for initiating anonymous sex and compulsive sexual behavior. But the Internet also provides opportunities for enhanced safer sex negotiations, for creating new support networks for clients who may otherwise feel isolated, and for accessing HIV-related and mental health information and referrals.

Because Internet communication does not involve any physical or sensory interaction other than reading text on a computer screen, it is possible for people to tailor how they present themselves in almost any way they choose. For many people, the Internet is a vehicle for exploring sexual fantasies with other Internet users while remaining anonymous in the comfort of their homes. However, people may become overwhelmed by these fantasy scenarios and act them out in real life, often with partners they have met online. For example, a heterosexual woman may use Internet chat rooms to indulge her fantasies of being highly sexually active. The fantasy may become compelling enough for her to seek actual physical encounters with men she meets online. If meeting strangers for sex is a new behavior for her, she may not know how to negotiate safety on her own behalf. In addition, the expectations of her partners—perhaps encouraged by their online interactions with her—may cause them to pressure her into having unprotected sex.

Men who identify as heterosexual but who are curious about sex with other men may find that the anonymous and private nature of the Internet offers a way to satisfy their curiosity with a lower risk of compromising their established heterosexual identities than gay bars or other gay-identified venues. A byproduct of this is that these men are less likely to be knowledgeable about HIV transmission and prevention concepts than openly identified gay men, largely because people who do not identify with populations identified as HIV risk groups are often not exposed to HIV prevention campaigns or ignore prevention messages that they believe do not apply to them. For example, a heterosexual-identified male client interested in exploring sex with other men may not read gay publications or see prevention posters in gay bars. As a result, he may incorrectly assume that men who look healthy are HIV-negative.

By using open-ended questions or statements such as, “Tell me what you know about how HIV is transmitted,” a counselor can begin to assess the client’s knowledge about HIV. This will provide a starting point for the counselor to focus the discussion on helping the client explore ways to incorporate safer sex practices into sexual encounters with partners they meet online. The client-centered approach to continue this exploration is to prompt the client with an open-ended question, for example, “What can you do to reduce your HIV risks with the men you meet online?”

— A Counselor’s Perspective

“The Internet presents both challenges and opportunities for HIV test counselors, and it’s my responsibility to understand what they are so I can better serve my clients.”

Negotiating With Partners Online

The Internet allows people to interact with many more potential sex partners than they would at a bar or other face-to-face venue, to do so with greater anonymity, and with the possibility of quickly meeting in person. One of the challenges of the Internet’s immediacy is the tendency to respond to invitations impulsively without considering the consequences of infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). For example, two people in a chat room discussing sex may decide to meet in person, and the encounter may occur as quickly as it takes for one of them to travel to the other.

The immediacy of such scenarios often precludes any forethought about the encounter, and safer sex negotiations are less likely to occur offline if they have not already occurred online. Unlike in a bar or other offline location, the decision to have sex with someone met on the Internet is often made before ever meeting in person. For some people, interacting in the intangible world of “cyberspace” inspires their imaginations to create fantasies, and people tend to fantasize about best-case scenarios without considering real-life risks.

In order to remain safe with the sex partners they meet online, clients need to develop skills for establishing safety before meeting in person. One way of increasing the likelihood of safer sex is to utilize a personal profile, a common feature of chat rooms and online dating services that
allows users to describe themselves to other users who choose to read the profile. Personal profiles often include a person’s age, birth sign, sexual preference, ethnicity, and interests. Because information in a personal profile is available to all potential online sex partners, it is an effective way for people to divulge their HIV status, boundaries about their sexual practices, and requirements for safer sex. It may be useful for counselors to help clients create these online profiles. For example, a counselor may help a gay client create a profile that states, “HIV-negative, oral sex mainly, bottom with condoms only.”

In addition to helping clients create personal profiles, counselors may encourage clients to initiate safer sex discussions while online, because this type of negotiation is often more effective online than in person. One reason for this is that it is usually easier to reject someone who refuses to use condoms while still online than in person. Such a discussion should include clarifying the limits of one’s sexual practices. Counselors can help clients write up a few cogent phrases about safety that they can use as standard statements online. For example, “I’m HIV-negative and committed to staying that way, so I always use condoms when I have anal sex.”

It is also easier for people to negotiate encounters in neutral places like cafes rather than at a person’s home. Encourage clients to consider meeting potential sex partners from the Internet in a neutral setting before agreeing to a sexual encounter. To achieve this, a client might say something like this while still online or on the telephone: “Let’s meet for a cup of coffee at a café and see if there is enough interest and chemistry to go further. If it doesn’t feel right, let’s agree that there are no strings attached.”

Face-to-Face Negotiations
The prospect of meeting face-to-face for sex after chatting online can be an exciting idea. Although negotiating safety prior to meeting is important, explain to clients that prior agreements and understandings may not always guarantee safer sex. Help clients prepare for occasions in which they meet someone who does not want to honor prior online or telephone agreements. Explore how clients plan to deal with pressures to have unprotected sex, keeping in mind that the risk for unprotected sex in such situations usually increases if alcohol or other drug use is involved. Ask open-ended questions to help clients explore and prepare for what they would do in a difficult situation. For example, “What would you do if your partner was intoxicated and was pressuring you to have unprotected sex? What might you do if you felt strongly attracted to this person?”

When working with clients who have difficulty asserting themselves in potentially risky situations, help them develop simple phrases they can fall back on when they feel pressured. Phrases such as, “No, I’m not into that,” “No, that is more than I’m willing to do,” and “No, that doesn’t appeal to me,” can become important tools to empower clients to reduce their likelihood of engaging in HIV risk behaviors.

Although Internet dating poses some prevention challenges, counselors should not lose sight of its benefits. Encourage clients to enjoy themselves with this new medium, but also prepare them to remain safe during difficult situations by supporting their abilities to maintain strong and healthy boundaries. Consider using role-playing exercises to help clients improve their

References
ability to cope with challenging scenarios. In addition, referrals to resources such as assertiveness training programs, communication classes, HIV and other STD prevention services, and further counseling may provide clients with opportunities to improve their skills in negotiating boundaries and safety.

Compulsive Online Sex

Although some clients may engage in sexually compulsive behaviors when meeting people on the Internet, it is important to remember that most HIV counselors are not trained to assess compulsive behaviors, and it is inappropriate for them to try to do so. If the issue arises, however, discuss it with clients while remaining non-judgmental and client-centered. As is the case with other compulsive behaviors, people often feel as if they are not in control of their actions and are often preoccupied by or obsessed with the behavior. For many people, compulsive behaviors intensify to the point of having negative and sometimes severe repercussions on their lives.

If clients present themselves as preoccupied with meeting people online for sex or seem to have trouble controlling this behavior, ask if they think it is problematic. If the client acknowledges that it is a problem, explain that there are other people with similar difficulties and that there is help available. Then provide referrals for counseling or support groups. Given that compulsive online sex is a relatively new phenomenon, counselors may not be able to find specific referrals, but general referrals for sexually compulsive behavior will most likely be appropriate. Also provide referrals to reputable online resources, which these clients may be likely to access given their heavy Internet use.

Internet Resources

One of the benefits of the Internet is the availability of a wide range of resources. Clients seeking information on HIV or other STDs can find resources through search engines by typing in key words like “HIV,” “AIDS,” or “STD.” However, because the reliability of information is often questionable, counselors should develop a list of reputable online resources and have these readily available as referrals for clients with Internet access.

Counselors may also consider message boards or chat rooms as referrals for clients who may not feel comfortable meeting people in bars or who may be geographically isolated, such as gay or lesbian clients who live in rural areas.
Test Yourself

Review Questions

1. True or False: Cybersex can cause HIV infection.

2. True or False: The ease of posting on the Internet without any level of quality control or editorial standards results in misinformation.

3. True or False: The anonymity of the Internet makes it an appealing medium for people seeking same-sex encounters but who do not openly identify as gay or bisexual.

4. Which of the following have researchers described as categories of people who use the Internet for sexual pursuits? a) recreational users; b) compulsive users; c) at-risk users; d) all of the above.

5. According to a study of heterosexual chat rooms in the United States, what percent of participants reported that they had met someone in person with whom they became involved as a result of meeting in a chat room? a) 10 percent; b) 24 percent; c) 57 percent; d) 80 percent.

6. True or False: When communicating with other people on the Internet, an online encounter can quickly develop into a physical encounter with limited time for forethought or consideration of HIV risk.

7. Which of the following are ways the Internet can be used for sexual purposes? a) accessing sex education; b) engaging in cybersex; c) seeking partners for physical sexual encounters; d) all of the above.

8. True or False: There is no difference between the way people tend to perceive relationships that develop online compared with those that develop offline.

Discussion Questions

1. How can counselors stay abreast of Internet trends and technologies that may affect client risk behaviors?

2. What are some of the benefits the Internet may provide for clients?

3. How can acting out fantasies through cybersex affect a person’s offline sexual behavior?

4. How is the psychological process related to meeting people on the Internet different from meeting people in face-to-face settings?

5. How can counselors efficiently research and maintain current information on Internet resources that they can provide as referrals for clients?

Answers

1. False. Cybersex alone poses no risk for transmission of HIV or other STDs because there is no physical interaction or exchange of bodily fluids. However, cybersex can evolve into face-to-face meetings involving sex that may pose a risk for infection.

2. True.

3. True.

4. d.

5. c.

6. True.

7. d.

8. False. Because of the disinhibiting effect of Internet communication, people tend to open up emotionally more quickly online than offline. Perceptions of trust, intimacy and acceptance tend to be heightened in online relationships.
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