

The rate of new partner acquisition and overlapping patterns of sexual partnerships are central to STI dynamics.

The Health Protection Agency suggests that "Have fewer sexual partners" is a sexual health message that needs to be widely disseminated to MSM (*Sexually Transmitted Infections and Men who have Sex with Men in the UK: 2008 Report*).

Making It Count 4 (MIC4) identifies having another sexual partner (or not) as one of ten key choices facing MSM that has a bearing on future HIV incidence in the population. Amongst other approaches, MIC4 supports a social marketing approach which raises awareness of the potential benefits of choosing *not* to have sex with a new partner while making it clear that it is MSM themselves who make this choice.

This Insight Blast considers the incentives, benefits and advantages of choosing to *not* to have sex with another sexual partner. It should be particularly useful in the development of social marketing interventions.

Benefits and costs of having no sex

In Month 1 of the Sigma Panel (sent on 1st February 2011), 14% of Panel members (261/1821 men, missing 2) said they had not had sex with a man in January. These men were asked two open-ended questions: *From your perspective, what were the benefits or advantages of not having had sex (with a man) in January?* and an identical question for *the costs or drawbacks of not having had sex*.

Overall, 224 gave some response to the benefits question and 222 gave some response to the costs question. The most common answer when asked for benefits was 'none'. The following table summarises all the other answers. Often, benefits and costs of not having sex were expressed as the absence of the costs and benefits of having had sex. We have balanced the table with the logical obverses.

Table 1: Benefits and costs of having no sex (men who had no sex in January 2011)

	Not having sex	Having sex
Benefits	<p>Making use of my time. Focussing on my stuff. Time for friends. Getting to know each other first; avoid having sex with someone I don't like. Postponed pleasure is greater. Showing commitment to main partner; not feeling guilt toward main partner; enjoying sexual exclusivity.</p> <p>Not passing an infection. Not picking up an infection. Not having to think about or deal with talking about HIV. No effort. No regret. No heartache. Not worrying about how I look. No disappointments, stress, hassle. Feeling socially safe. Independence and freedom; keeping things simple. Saving money. Self-respect. Peace of mind.</p>	<p>Improves well-being. Positive moods, happiness, relaxation, stress release, happy, balanced. Sexual release. Feeling connected, affection, sociable. Fun. Feeling desired, self-confident. Pleasure. Builds relationship. He might develop into a steady partner. Free to get on with things; concentration.</p>
Costs	<p>Not improving well-being. Negative moods, depression, anxiety, stressed, grumpy, moody. Sexual frustration. Feeling isolated, lack of affection, lonely. Boredom. Feeling unattractive, insecure. Lack of pleasure. Strain on relationship. Missed opportunity to meet steady partner. Waste time thinking about sex; distraction.</p>	<p>Wasting time seeking a partner. Distractions. Less time for friends. Considering each other as sexual objects; having sex with someone I find I don't like. Immediate pleasure becomes routine. Undermining main partner; feeling guilt over main partner; not benefitting from sexual exclusivity.</p> <p>Passing an infection. Picking up an infection. Feeling obliged to talk about HIV status and negative reactions to that. Effort. Regret. Heartache. Worrying about how I look. Disappointment, stress, hassle. Feeling out of my depth, awkward. Someone getting needy; relationship complications. Spending money (travel, hotel, sex worker). Self-loathing. Anxiety.</p>

Sex is seen as having the potential to provide a wide range of physical, psychological and social benefits. It is also seen as having the potential for a wide range of costs. The stakes involved in choosing to have sex or not are high and go well beyond sexually transmitted infections. Many of the things men look for in sex for could also be found through friendships.

The majority of cited benefits of not having sex were the absence of the potential costs of having sex. For most men there is little or no positive benefit from avoiding sex altogether. For this reason communications should not suggest that men avoid sex altogether. The focus should be on the next decision, not all future decisions. Instead, communications could associate declining, deferring or dating sexual partners in specific circumstances with specific positive outcomes.

Whether or not there are benefits to not having sex depends on whether or not it is chosen (rather than imposed) and what is done with the time instead. The benefits of not having sex are also highly dependent on whether or not the sex foregone is with a steady or non-steady partner, and if with a non-steady partner, whether or not men also have a steady partner.

INSIGHTS: What is at stake in choosing to not have another sexual partner is very different for men who are single and those in steady relationships. The social marketing of choosing not to have another partner should segment men by relationship status, and address the benefits acquired (and/or the costs avoided) of not another sexual partner separately for single men and those with a steady partner.

The (negative) benefit of avoiding sex with someone I do not like is a prevalent theme throughout the data in this Insight Blast. This suggests that many men have sexual partners they wish they had not. Helping men to better identify potentially incompatible sexual partners, and selectively eliminating these, would both reduce the harms associated with multiple sexual partners and improve the quality of men's sex lives.

Benefits and costs of declining a new sex partner

The benefits of not having sex at all may be less clear than the benefits of not having sex with a particular partner. In Month 2 (survey of 1st March) 1728 men completed the survey and were asked *Have you ever had an opportunity for sex with a new partner but you decided not to take it. This would be an occasion when you actively choose not to have sex with a new partner (rather than wanting to have sex but not managing to)*. Overall 73.9% indicated 'yes' (missing answer for 9 men) and these men were asked when the most recent occasion of doing this was. The figure shows the cumulative proportion of Panel members who had declined a potential sex partner over increasing retrospective periods.

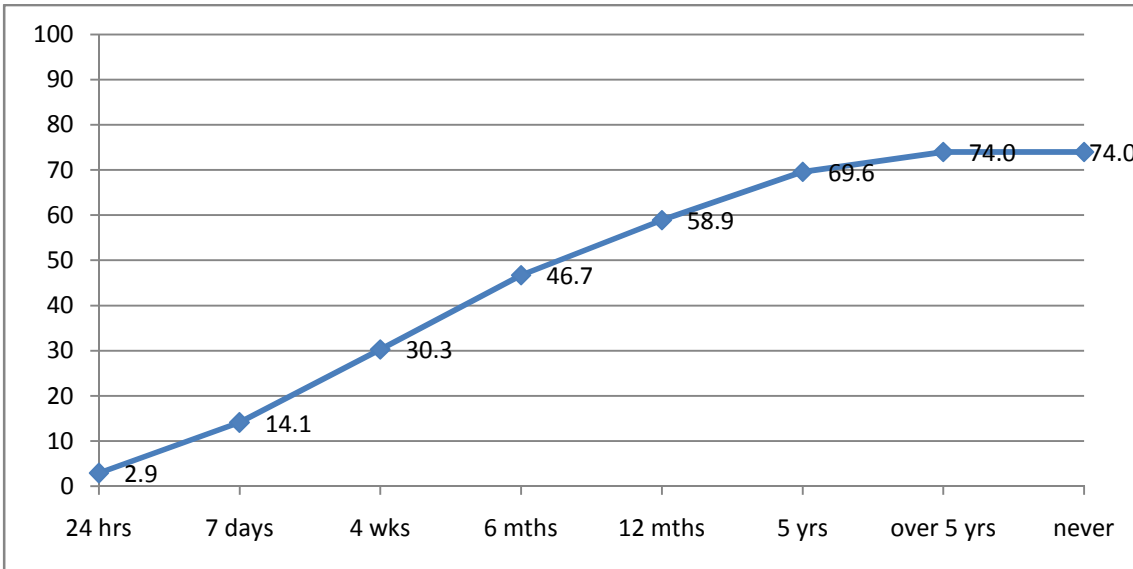


Figure 1: Length of time since declining a new sexual partner

Overall, 30.3% of men had declined an opportunity for a new sex partner in the last 4 weeks and 58.9% had done so in the last 12 months.

INSIGHT: Declining a potential new sex partner is a common experience for MSM. Increasing this choice is not 'pushing at a closed door' but is engaging with something many men do and will do in the future. Declining sex is no more alien to MSM or gay culture than having sex is.

Men who said they had ever declined an opportunity for sex with a new partner were asked *From your perspective, what were the benefits of not having had sex with that partner on that occasion?* and an identical question about *costs*. Of the 1270 men, 1106 responded to the question on benefits and 1059 supplied a cost.

The most common answer to *What were the costs of not having had sex?* was 'none'. Choosing precaution need not always carry costs and choosing not to have sex is often the most advantageous thing to do. These are situations when there is a high risk of little benefit from sex. Communications could focus on influencing men to recognise when a new sex partner is likely to carry little benefit, and consequently when choosing to do something else carries little cost.

The following table summarises the range of costs and benefits of declining a new sex partner men cited.

Table 2: Benefits and costs of declining a new sex partner (men who had ever declined a new sex partner)

	Decline sex with another partner	Have sex with another partner
Benefits	<p>Feeling closer to steady partner by not having sex with others.</p> <p>Postponing sex to a more suitable time and place will make it better.</p> <p>Allows time to get to know him; increases trust and emotional understanding; Enjoy kiss and cuddle for longer; Builds the sexual tension (treat 'em mean to keep 'em keen; the mystery remains).</p> <p>Create a good impression with someone you want to see again; demonstrate he's more than a passing interest.</p> <p>Feel in control of sexual choices; Maintain self-respect; maintain personal standards.</p> <p>The fantasy of what might have been is better than the reality.</p> <p>He will make a better long-term friend than short-term shag.</p> <p>Being clear that I do not want a relationship with him (not leading him on).</p> <p>Save money (if commercial sex declined).</p> <p>Time to do other stuff (including sleep); Got home on time; caught my train.</p> <p>No health, violence or social risks.</p> <p>Not having to talk about HIV.</p> <p>Not upsetting the friends I'm out with; not upsetting other admirers by choosing one.</p>	<p>Sexual release.</p> <p>An experience / adventure / excitement.</p> <p>Pleasing him; keeping his interest; fostering a relationship / friendship; acquiring a regular partner.</p> <p>Got him off my back; keeping him quiet / placated.</p> <p>Not getting a reputation as a prick-tease/frigid/time-waster.</p> <p>Not regret at not knowing what would have happened.</p> <p>Gets down to the business; cuts to the chase on sexual compatibility.</p> <p>Not feeling like I've wasted time / a journey / preparation.</p>
Costs	<p>Sexual frustration.</p> <p>Boredom; loneliness.</p> <p>Hurting his feelings; losing his interest; less chance of relationship / friendship; might not get another opportunity with him; remaining alone.</p> <p>They kept pestering me for sex; he might get angry / violent.</p> <p>Getting a reputation as a prick-tease / frigid / time-waster.</p> <p>Regret; wondering what might have been.</p> <p>Builds too much expectation for when we do have sex; becoming emotionally involved then finding out we sexually incompatible.</p> <p>Wasted time / journey (if decided not to have sex after travelling to meet him) / preparation.</p>	<p>Upset / endanger steady relationship (mine or his); Lying to steady partner (if monogamy agreed); Feeling guilty about steady partner.</p> <p>Sex is rushed or drunken and therefore poor.</p> <p>Create a bad impression; appear too easy; Getting a slutty reputation; I was dirty and offended/repulsed him.</p> <p>Sex with someone I don't fancy and/or don't like; Engaged in sexual acts I don't enjoy; Awkward or embarrassed during or afterwards;</p> <p>Guilt/regret/shame/bad feeling afterwards; Feeling abused/disrespected/used/humiliated afterwards; Feeling inadequate/ugly afterwards; Sexual performance anxiety; Feeling like I exploited/pressured him.</p> <p>Spoilt a good friendship with sexual complications (and knock-on effect with other friends).</p> <p>Gives impression I want to see them again when I don't (leading them on); Encouraging him to be clingy; Put me in debt to them; Having to decline sex acts I knew he wanted but I did not.</p> <p>Spending money.</p> <p>Lack of sleep / unfit for work next day; Time and effort (including travel).</p> <p>Picking up STI/HIV; Passing on STI/HIV; Violence from him; Risk of discovery (in public sex); Risk of censure (if in a position of authority over partner); Having to provide breakfast and chit-chat next morning.</p> <p>Feeling obliged to talk about HIV status and the potential negative reactions that might have.</p> <p>Annoyed the friend I was out with by deserting them; Having to choose between two admirers.</p>

The question about the benefits and costs of not having had a new sex partner on a specific occasion generated a much richer range of consequences (benefits and costs) than the question about simply not having sex.

Again, benefits and costs varied depending on whether men already had a steady partner or not, and by whether or not the potential partner was attractive and/or steady partner material. For men who have a steady partner, the main benefit of not having another sex partner is the fostering of a stronger and more secure relationship with the steady partner. Other benefits of monogamy (over open-relationships) will be explored in a later Insight Blast.

INSIGHT: For single men looking for a regular partner, postponing sex can be portrayed as a way of increasing the likelihood of establishing a steady relationship by allowing time to get to know each other, increases trust and emotional understanding, and creating a 'good impression'. Postponing sex can demonstrate more than a passing interest in a man. The risk is that it can also give the impression of disinterest. Communications could emphasise that men who are choosy are more desirable.

Being sexually assertive means being able to say no to what is not wanted as well as asking for what is wanted. Declining sex we do not want can make us feel in control of our sexual choices and maintains self-respect and personal standards. Portraying declining unwanted (or indifferent) sex partners as a positive, self-affirming choice, could increase the perceived value of not having another sex partner.

INSIGHT: When contemplating a new sexual partner, some partners are cheaper than others. Social marketing should focus on cutting back on cheap shags from which little benefit is sought and/or gained.

Setting specific costs of that next sex partner

Negative social marketing attempts to dissuade people from acting by raising their awareness of the costs of doing so, and raising their judgement of the likelihood of the cost occurring. If this route were taken with the next sexual partner, what levers might social marketing use?

Respondents to Month 2 were asked when they had last met a sexual partner online, at a sauna and in a gay cafe, pub or bar (the three most common settings for Panel members to have met sex partners in the last year). The following figure shows the cumulative proportion having met partners at these three location types.

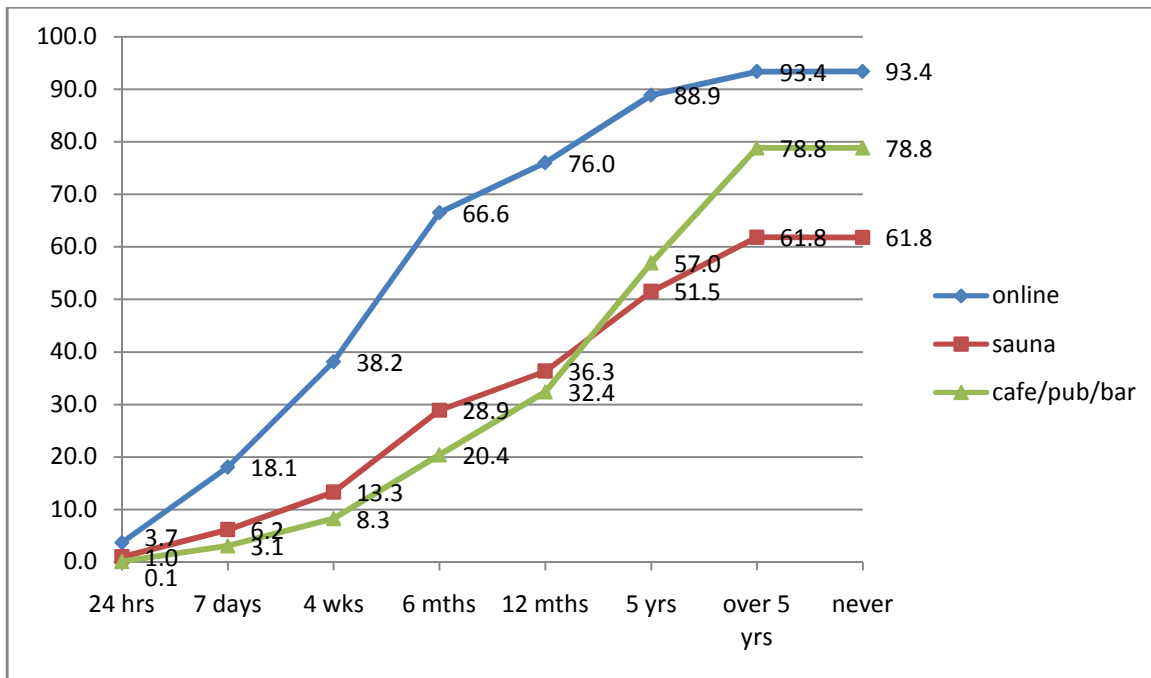


Figure 2: Length of time since meeting a new sex partner in different settings, cumulative percentage

Meeting sexual partners was more common online than in the other two setting types: 18% had met a sexual partner online in the last 7 days compared with 6% who had met a partner at a sauna and 3% in a cafe or bar. This may not be surprising among men recruited on the internet.

Online remains most popular setting for all time scales, reflecting the cohorts of men who have become sexually active since the emergence of internet. Although more men had met partners at cafes and bars than saunas ever and in the last 5 years, saunas were more common sites in shorter time periods. This could reflect the rising popularity of gay saunas in the UK in the last decade.

For each setting, men who had met a sexual partner there in the last 12 months were asked the open-ended question "What are the potential costs of meeting a sexual partner [in that setting]?" The following table summarises the range of costs provided. Those in **bold** are the costs more commonly mentioned for that setting.

Table 3: Potential costs of seeking and meeting a sex partner in three different settings (men who had met a sexual partner in that setting in the last 12 months)

On the internet	At a sauna	At a gay cafe, pub or bar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of site subscription; money. • Lots of chatting but no action; wasted time. • Waiting for men who do not show up; wasted time. • Who turns up might not match their description; older/ uglier/ fatter than pictures; odd, unstable, dishonest. • Feeling obliged to have sex with men who've made the effort to travel; sex with undesirable men. • Awkwardness of turning down men you don't now want sex with; wasted time • Inviting unknown people into your home; theft, assault. • Skips 'normal' stages of relationship; damages future relationship prospects. • Transient meaningless sex; lack of depth, feeling cold and empty afterwards. • Falling for someone who lives some distance away; the hassle / heartache that brings. • Other site users know you are there; exposure as MSM or as cruising MSM. • Not knowing them or their sexual history; picking up HIV/STI. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of entry; money. • Limited range of men - wasted visit or sex with undesirable men; unattractive; drunk/drugged; annoyingly persistent or pushy. • Uncommunicative atmosphere; difficult to negotiate boundaries, especially in groups. • Very focussed on physical aspects of sex; little chance to engage socially/emotionally. • Rejection can leave you feeling unattractive. • Transient meaningless sex; lack of depth, feeling cold and empty afterwards. • Unlikely to see / difficult to contact again; encourages callousness (rudeness, risk taking). • Other sauna users know you are there; exposure as MSM or as cruising MSM. • Not knowing them or their sexual history; picking up HIV/STI. • Picking up foot / skin infections. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost of drinks; money. • Effort to get there; travel, time. • Limited range of men; wasted time. • Drunken self or partner; poor judgement, poor control, risky sex, sex with unattractive men, regret. • Difficult atmosphere to converse in; not discovering sexual incompatibility before commencing sex. • Going home with / taking home unknown people; theft, assault. • Likely to see them again in the venue; awkwardness. • Not knowing them or their sexual history; picking up HIV/STI. • Partners may ask for money. • Other patrons/staff know you are there and who you approach or leave with; humiliation, gossip, outed, boyfriend informed. • Having to find a place for sex if you meet someone.

Some potential costs of seeking and meeting sexual partners are common to all settings used. For example, the next sexual partner is always an STI risk, and there is always the risk of a partner turning strange or violent. However, judgements of the likelihood of these outcomes vary by settings.

The ease of using the internet means it can also be used by men low sexual and social stock and who may find it difficult using face-to-face meeting places. Also it is a place where men can 'try out' chatting other men up without intending to actually meet. Time wasting and disappointing partners are the biggest drawbacks of online sexual networking.

STI costs are mentioned far more often in relation to saunas than other sites. The ease with which sexual contact is made means sexual partners are perceived as probably having had recent multiple sexual partners, thereby increasing the likelihood of STIs. The financial cost is also higher than other sites. Rudeness, pestering and lack of emotion were common drawbacks. It is easy to end up having sex with men you don't find attractive.

The most common negative consequences of meeting sexual partner in pubs are alcohol related - both the actual cost of the drinks and the impact on partner selection, negotiation and sexual performance. Unlike internet dating sites and saunas, bars and pubs provide settings for social activities other than sex.

INSIGHT: Communications could emphasise the costs of *seeking* the next sex partner in addition to (or instead of) actually having the next sex partner. Influencing men not to go online and not to go to saunas may be easier than influencing them not to go to bars and pubs. Further research is needed on which of the potential consequences are of most value to men.

Negative social marketing needs to provide a positive alternative to the action being discouraged. Communications should not tell men not to go online and not to go to saunas. It may be possible to portray the negative outcomes or consequences of seeking the next sexual partner (wasted time and money, sex with unattractive men, getting a reputation), followed by a suggestion for something more positive (seeking companionship with friends, seeking sex partners in settings more conducive to what is being looked for, investing in a sport or hobby other than sex).

There is plenty of scope for humorously portraying the negative consequences of seeking and meeting sex partner online and in saunas.

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