

POSITIVELY RISKY?

THERAPIST **DOMINIC DAVIES** SUGGESTS TEN REASONS WHY SOME MEN TAKE RISKS WITH THEIR HEALTH.



I've identified at least ten possible reasons, often found in combination, why some people take sexual risks and engage in unprotected sex. Greater awareness, understanding and discussion of such factors may help when trying to promote better sexual health, not least amongst gay men.

1. SENSUAL PLEASURE. For many men, sex without condoms feels better, more spontaneous and more sensual. There's no scrabbling around to put condoms on, and you can fuck and swap around quickly, easily and frequently without incurring a huge pile of used condoms.

2. THRILL-SEEKING. Some guys like danger. Condomless sex is like playing Russian Roulette. Other thrill-seeking behaviours include sex in public places and meeting strangers for sex.

3. DEPRESSION AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM. Gay men are more likely to self-harm and to consult a GP or mental health practitioner than a straight person is – most likely due to external and internal homophobia. Some anti-depressants cause side effects which may, in turn, lead to sexual risk-taking. Low self-esteem can leave us feeling our lives aren't worth protecting. Such negative thinking may lead to a sense that HIV infection is inevitable. It can even be a way to manage anxiety around fear of infection: "Once I'm infected I don't need to worry about this again."

4. "REAL LOVE". It's romantic! Unprotected sex can symbolise intimacy and trust for some. It can feel romantic to fuck without barriers as you literally put your life in your partner's hands.

5. SAFER-SEX FATIGUE. Some gay men have become tired of always having to protect themselves. This can lead to abandoning safer sex even after decades of being careful.

6. DISINHIBITION THROUGH DRUGS OR ALCOHOL. When high on drugs (esp. alcohol, GBH or crystal meth) it is harder to remain aware and to maintain one's resolve always to have safer sex.

7. PEER PRESSURE: OTHERS DO IT. Scrolling the London pages of some cruising websites, one could be forgiven for thinking that safer sex is a rare and arcane

practice. The increased frequency of entries other than "Always" in the Safer Sex box contributes to the idea that: "If everyone else is doing it, why do I need to bother?"

8. DENIAL - "I'M OK AND HE LOOKS OK". There's a kind of magical thinking that leads some men to think they can see or "just know" that someone isn't infected or that they'll somehow remain OK if they occasionally have unprotected sex with someone particularly attractive, young, charming or horny!

9. REBELLING AGAINST THE FORBIDDEN. Some gay men consider themselves outsiders and unprotected sex can be a way to say: "Fuck you, this is my body and I'll do with it what I want." The forbidden has more allure for some and unprotected sex is "transgressive".

THERE ARE MANY REASONS WHY SOME OF US TAKE RISKS. IT CAN HELP TO BE AWARE OF THEM

10. CALCULATING RISKS. Many men are highly informed about the dangers and use a variety of risk reduction strategies. These may include only having sex with people who share their HIV antibody status and test regularly; being the active partner; not coming inside; having receptive anal sex only with guys who have an undetectable viral load and are on anti-retroviral meds.

There are many reasons why some of us take such risks. It can help to be aware of them. If you are concerned about your risk-taking it can also help to talk to someone. After all, we're all responsible for our own health and for the health of those we have sex with.

Pink Therapy is the UK's largest independent specialist therapy organisation working with gender and sexual minority clients: www.pinktherapy.com

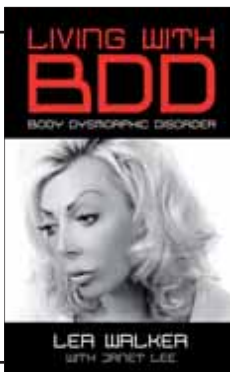
VICTORIA MOVES

The Victoria Clinic – the Chelsea and Westminster Hospital's well-known sexual health clinic – is on the move. After several years at premises on Vincent Square, Victoria, SW1, the whole operation is upping sticks and taking over swanky new premises in the very heart of Soho. The team tell us that they have outgrown their current home ("our current space was designed to deal with less than a quarter of the patients we currently see"), and that the new clinic will be significantly larger in size, with an enlarged waiting area and more consulting rooms.



The new clinic – appropriately named **The New Victoria Clinic** – will be at 56 Dean Street, between Old Compton Street and Soho Square, W1. The old premises will continue to take patients until Wednesday 18 February 2009. They will then close, and the new premises will re-open on Monday 2 March 2009.

Anyone with any questions can phone the clinic on 020 8846 6699 or email Victoria.clinic@chelwest.nhs.uk



IN HER EYES

Living With BDD (Body Dysmorphic Disorder) is a new book by **Lea Walker**, former *Big Brother* contestant and one half of familiar scene faces Dick & Dolly. We do love Lea, and her surgically enhanced figure and larger-than-life personality has ensured she's been a regular fixture on the Soho scene since her time in the BB house in 2006. However, behind the smile, Lea has had some tough times in her life, battling eating disorders and body dysmorphic disorder. BDD is when you constantly

believe that there is something wrong with your appearance – that you are too thin or overweight, or that you are in desperate need of cosmetic surgery, despite the fact that to most other people you look absolutely fine. It's rooted in low self-esteem and self-loathing. Lea talks about her problems with complete openness and honesty, and also details her experience of being in *Big Brother*. It's a captivating read that won't fail to move you, and may strike a chord with anyone who has had issues around food, dieting or their appearance. **Living With BDD**, by Lea Walker, is out now priced £12.99 through Apex Publishing.