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Mother-to-son communication about sex may help increase routine HIV testing among young men of color who have sex with men

(CHICAGO) Younger men of color who have sex with men (YMSM) are disproportionately affected by new diagnoses of HIV. In addition, prior research has found that black and Latino YMSM are less likely than white YMSM to engage in routine HIV testing and to be aware of their HIV status, factors that may contribute to the rising number of new infections among YMSM. However, research from a new University of Chicago study supports that meaningful mother-to-son conversations, specifically about sexual relationships with other males, is strongly correlated with having had an HIV test in the past six months for YMSM.

“Parents haven’t been involved in most HIV prevention research or programs with YMSM. There are often assumptions that youth aren’t out to their parents, that parents aren’t accepting of their sons, and that we can’t engage parents and families in this work,” said Alida Bouris, PhD, principal investigator of the study and assistant professor in the School of Social Administration and Co-Director of the Chicago Center for HIV Elimination at the University of Chicago. “In contrast, these findings show that the majority of youth have disclosed their sexual orientation to their mothers, and that mothers and sons are openly talking about different aspects of sex and sexuality, including same-sex behavior. Most importantly, we find that the likelihood of having had an HIV test in the past six months increases when moms have open conversations with their sons about having sexual relationships with other young men. The overall findings indicate that mothers could play an important role in increasing routine HIV testing among YMSM of color, and that we are missing opportunities to bring parents into current efforts to stem the youth epidemic.”

Both local and national surveillance data indicate that YMSM are at significant risk for being infected with HIV during adolescence and the transition to early adulthood. In addition, prior research has found that black and Latino YMSM are less likely than white YMSM to engage in routine HIV testing and to be aware of their HIV status. Research with heterosexual youth indicates that parents can reduce sexual risk taking, improve partner communication, and increase health-promoting behaviors with early conversations about sex. However, mother-son communication about sex has been understudied among YMSM of color.

"Despite a decreasing number of new HIV diagnoses in most other demographic categories, the diagnosis rate for younger men of color who have sex with men is growing," said Brandon Hill, Ph.D. co-author of the study and Executive Director for the Center for Interdisciplinary Inquiry and Innovation in Sexual and Reproductive Health (Ci3) at the University of Chicago. "The general conversation about puberty and pregnancy prevention was, interestingly, negatively associated with youth’s testing behaviors."

The study was published online in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2015.07.007>

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Founded in 2012, Ci3 is an award-winning research center at the University of Chicago. Ci3 envisions a world in which all youth emerge into adulthood with agency over their bodies and futures. As such, we are committed to empowering young people, conducting innovative research, and uncovering opportunities for policy and systemic

change. Ci3 houses three labs: the Game Changer Chicago Design Lab, the Transmedia Story Lab, and the Design Thinking Lab. Through these labs, Ci3's interdisciplinary team of medical providers, public health scholars, policy researchers, designers, and artists create games, digital narratives, and interventions with and for youth. Developed with an eye towards scaling, each of our interventions can be implemented in settings across the Chicagoland area and beyond.

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