

This FAQ chapter presents the views and experiences of men in relation to poppers. We begin with quotes from men below, and continue to represent what we have been told in the pages that follow.

It gives you a formidable sexual rush.

(Online respondent)

It takes sex to the next level, whether it's masturbation or with someone else. It also helps overcome some psychological barriers to bottoming, and makes the whole process of preparing for bottoming quicker.

(Online respondent)

I try to minimise risk of discomfort and I find that poppers help... But they do help me relax and reduce the risk of injury or tearing or anything like that. But equally they disinhibit you unless you are quite firm in your mind about what you will and won't do.

(Bisexual, 45+, HIV negative)

Are using poppers safe? There's not much information to go on.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative)

FAQ Scotland is part of a larger project that wants to prevent HIV infections in Scotland among gay and bisexual men. The larger project is called an HIV Needs Assessment, undertaken by NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and NHS Lothian. For more about FAQ and other FAQ chapters go to [www.faqscotland.co.uk](http://www.faqscotland.co.uk)

## OVERVIEW

### What we learned from men about their experiences:

- Poppers use by gay and bisexual men is common, yet it does not appear to be discussed in the context of HIV/Sexual Health Service engagement with men.
- In the first wave of online FAQ work (the Diary Room) two-fifths of men report that they like to use poppers; men 35+ are more likely to use them.
- In the second wave of FAQ online the *Poppers* survey shows that one in five men use poppers *most times* when having sex, similarly around 1 in 5 *often* when having sex, with a further 2 in every 5 men *sometimes* using them when having sex. This means that of these respondents only 1 in 5 men never use poppers.
- In reports of *recent sex*, approximately 20% of men interviewed by FAQ report use of poppers.
- From analysis of our surveys there is no difference between gay and bisexual men's use of poppers.
- Men report that the most common reasons for using poppers are that they increase sexual feelings and pleasure and help men relax for anal sex.
- Men also report that using poppers disinhibits the individual; this can affect choices or decisions about anal intercourse and condom use.
- From the FAQ Poppers survey fewer than 1 in 20 men have spoken to someone at a sexual health clinic about poppers while 3 in 5 would be happy to do so, or might do so. This willingness to talk about poppers is true for gay and bisexual men and across all ages.
- Men's questions about poppers are predominantly about safety and both short and long term health impacts.

### What findings mean for HIV prevention and HIV/Sexual Health clinical services:

- With many men reporting using poppers, some recognising that their use can affect choices or decisions about anal intercourse and condom use, and very few men reporting that this is discussed in the context of a sexual health clinical engagement, services should consider how to introduce discussion of poppers in consultations.
- Individualised care should provide an opportunity to discuss and plan risk reduction strategies that are particular and appropriate to the individual's circumstances and their use of poppers.
- Services need to provide basic health information about poppers and the health impacts of their use.

### Reflective questions for practitioners

Throughout FAQ reporting we ask individual practitioners, teams and services to read the detail of findings and then take time to reflect on some important questions.

- Have I considered the role that poppers plays in the sex men have?
- How do I approach a conversation with a man about his use of poppers?
- If you talk about poppers what is the starting point or focus: Health risks? Pleasure? Why poppers are used? Men's own questions?
- Is there a need for a refreshed and constructive dialogue about poppers use amongst gay and bisexual men/across the community?

For more about the FAQ approach and project participants go to the **About FAQ** chapter at: [www.faqscotland.co.uk](http://www.faqscotland.co.uk)

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### INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS

Men have responded to questions about their use of poppers in FAQ telephone interviews and both phases of FAQ online work - in the phase 1 **Diary Room** survey and a phase 2 thematic survey called **Poppers**.

Poppers is the common name given to a drug which is in the class of drugs called alkyl nitrites. In Europe poppers contain isopropyl nitrate. They are usually bought on the internet or in gay clubs or bars, in sex shops or in shops selling drug paraphernalia. Poppers are inhaled and it is illegal to sell them as advertised for human consumption, so they are usually sold as room odourisers. They became part of the disco/club scene during the 1970s and are used by gay and bisexual men when having sex because they relax muscles and enhance orgasm.

### FINDINGS

#### Use of poppers

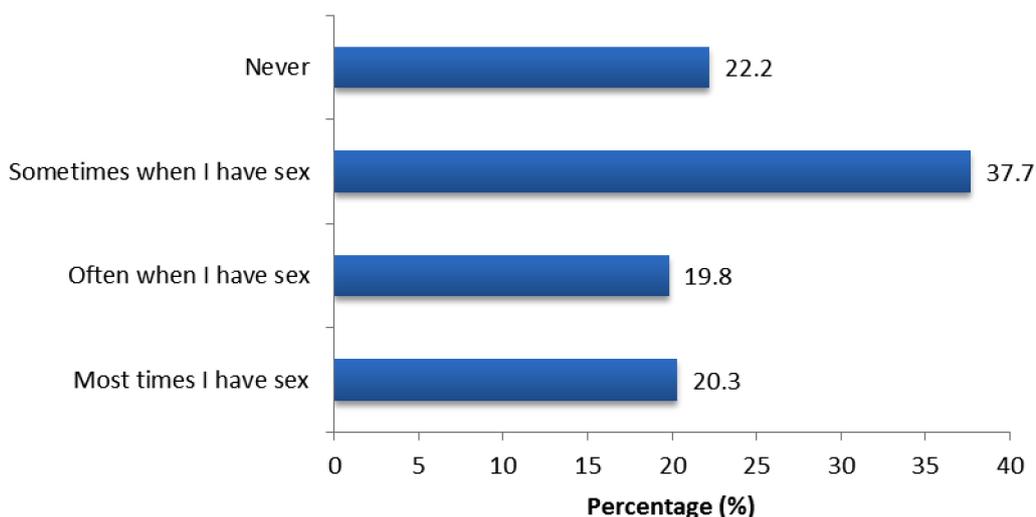
There have been several opportunities across FAQ to establish the level of poppers use among gay and bisexual men.

In the first wave of FAQ interviews, involving 118 men, interviewees were asked to discuss 2 recent experiences of sex with another man. We asked men about poppers use in each of these experiences. In describing the first of their recent sexual experiences 28 men (23.7%) said they had used poppers. In the second experience described 24 men (20.3%) said they had used poppers. FAQ 2<sup>nd</sup> interviews then re-engaged 65 men (from the original 118). Again they were asked about their most recent sexual experience and 14 men (21.5%) said they had used poppers.

While FAQ interviewees were asked about recent sex the **Diary Room** survey posed a more general question: *Do you like to use poppers when you have sex with guys?* 420 men responded and from across the full cohort of men, 188 men (44.7%) responded 'yes'. There was a significant association between poppers use and age (described in the table below) so that poppers use is particularly associated with men aged 36 and over.

The second phase of online work allowed FAQ to focus on a number of themes, one of these thematic surveys was about poppers. Respondents were asked about their use of poppers. As men chose to respond to a specific poppers survey it might be expected that usage would be high but as the chart below indicates, poppers use amongst these men shows nearly 4 in 5 men using poppers.

**How would you describe your use of poppers? (n=207)**



From the **Poppers** survey we looked for associations between age and reported frequency of poppers use but, unlike in the larger **Diary Room** survey, found none. Of the men responding to the **Poppers** survey similar proportions of gay and bisexual men (19.3% of gay and 17.1% of bisexual men) report using poppers often. More bisexual men (31.7%) report never using poppers, compared to gay men (19.3%).

With use of poppers significant among the men responding to our on line themed survey we also asked men if they had ever discussed poppers with someone at a sexual health clinic: only 8 men (3.9% of respondents) replied 'yes'. However, when we asked if men *would ever discuss using poppers with someone at a sexual health clinic*, nearly two-thirds of men indicated an interest in doing so.

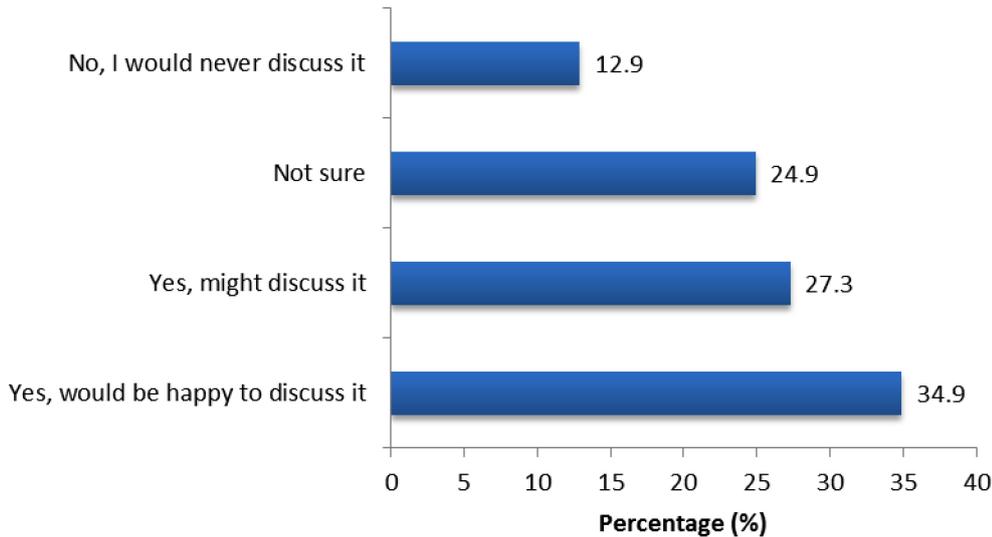
It has been possible to explore associations between age and sexual orientation and interest in speaking with clinic staff about poppers. In terms of age, despite not being statistically significant, we found that the lowest proportion of men who reported they would *never* discuss poppers at a sexual health clinic was between the ages 36-45 (11.4%): the same age group who reported using poppers the most frequently. This indicates the possibility of having discussions about poppers. Looking at the association between sexual orientation and interest in speaking with clinic staff, results show that similar proportions of gay (13.7%) and bisexual (14.6%) report *never* wanting to discuss poppers with someone at a sexual health centre, while slightly more bisexual men (68.3%) than gay men (59%) report being willing to discuss poppers use.

**Why men use poppers**

The online **Poppers** survey asked men via an open question, to explain why they use poppers. Reviewing the range of responses (from 138 men), men identify these themes. Some men identify more than one reason.

*Poppers increase sexual feelings and pleasure/intensifies experience of anal sex/intensifies orgasm (cited by 42 men).*

**Would you ever discuss using poppers with someone at a sexual health clinic? (n=209)**



It gives you a formidable sexual rush.

(Online respondent)

It just gives you a quick blood rush and makes feelings in certain areas more intense.

(Online respondent)

They relax the muscles including in the arteries giving a rush of blood to the head and a fuller erection. Very pleasant feeling. Heightens sexual pleasure.

(Online respondent)

*Poppers help relax you for anal sex/makes anal sex easier (42 men)*

They give you a horny 20 second rush which makes sex feel a little less painful. More often or not they can make you feel more “Relaxed” and more willing.

(Online respondent)

It takes sex to the next level, whether it’s masturbation or with someone else. It also helps overcome some psychological barriers to bottoming, and makes the whole process of preparing for bottoming quicker.

(Online respondent)

*Poppers give a high, rush, buzz/to feel euphoric (36 men)*

For a rush during sex.

(Online respondent)

*Poppers make you feel horny/sexy (cited by 18 men)*

A rush that makes me horny and more into the moment.

(Online respondent)

*Poppers help you to lose yourself/escape into the moment by lowering inhibitions (cited by 4 men)*

Expands your mind, removes your inhibitions.

(Online respondent)

Makes me horny / dirty as fuck. Inhibitions out the window. Usually the best (and longest) sex I have.

(Online respondent)

*Poppers are fun (cited by 3 men)*

A bit of extra fun.

(Online respondent)

Some men taking part in FAQ telephone interviews, took an opportunity to reflect on poppers. These men also report they use poppers because they enjoy the 'high' and poppers enhance sexual enjoyment and orgasm; they also help men relax and make anal sex more comfortable. Men also report that using poppers disinhibits the individual, which can affect choices or decisions about anal intercourse and condom use.

Nice and sexual a bit of foreplay you get kissing and get really horny on the poppers so it naturally progresses into fucking... Just the enjoyment of it, getting high on the enjoyment of it. Sometimes if it's poppers, the poppers take over it's just the enjoyment of it.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative I1/069)

I try to minimise risk of discomfort and I find that poppers help... But they do help me relax and reduce the risk of injury or tearing or anything like that. But equally they disinhibit you unless you are quite firm in your mind about what you will and won't do.

(Bisexual, 45+, HIV negative. I3/122)

Saunas are made up of married guys, once they get in there, a sniff of poppers, it's a different world, a comfort zone and they feel invincible, no harm will come to them... They get a bottle of poppers up their nose, a few beers, logic goes out the window.

(Gay, 45+, HIV positive I2/111)

He was using poppers and we got turned on. He penetrated me without condoms and I was very turned on so I let it happen.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative I1/013)

Interviewees also showed interest in knowing more about the safety of using poppers.

Are using poppers safe? There's not much information to go on.

(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative I3/134)

### Questions men have about poppers

FAQ is interested in the questions men might ask about aspects of sex, sexual health or relationships, given the opportunity. These questions might form part of a dialogue with men in sexual health settings. The thematic poppers survey asked men: *If you could ask any question about poppers what would you like to know?*

Reviewing the range of online responses (93) men identify these themes. Some men identify more than one question/theme of interest.

27 men asked about the long term health impacts of poppers use:

Do they cause any permanent damage?  
 Health detrimental effects? Don't know what they are.  
 Is it affecting my long term health? My eyesight feels bad after I use them.

20 men asked about the immediate harmful effects, side effects, damages or health risks of poppers use:

What are the risk factors in taking poppers apart from feeling disinhibited?  
 Are they harmful to me, if so in what way?

16 men asked about how safe or dangerous poppers are, including when they are used with other drugs:

How safe are they?  
 Can they be used with Viagra?

9 men asked about how poppers work/what they do:

What exactly do poppers do when inhaled? I mean, what happens on a medical point of view.  
 How dangerous are they really and can one have an overdose? If yes, how easily?  
 Where did it come from and what's in it. And also, what was the original purpose of it?

7 men asked questions about legal issues or poppers showing in drug tests:

Do they show up on drugs test/are they legal?

5 asked questions about the range of brands, poor quality of some and how to access good quality poppers:

Where are the cheapest and what are the effects of different brands?  
 Why do the new formula poppers, give me a headache & make my chest wheezy, thought they were meant to be safer?

5 men asked questions about how much poppers use is safe use:

How much, is too much?

3 men asked about what poppers are made from:

What is in poppers? What are they?  
 What are they composed of?

2 men asked why men use them:

Why do you use them?

Individual men asked these questions:

Why are they so hard to get?  
 Can women use them as an anal relaxant?  
 Are there alternatives that do the same thing?  
 What's the best way to store them?