

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

I go to them looking for sex and get what I am looking for.

(Online respondent)

Probably the sex I have out with the relationship is risky in saunas, so I realise it's a riskier context, having sex with guys who have lots of sex.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative)

Sometimes it's the circumstances. If you're in a sauna it's not the thing. People don't talk... There's very little discussion about status.

(Gay, 45+, HIV positive)

Usually safe sex only, plenty condoms and lube available.

(Online respondent)

I would need to be asked outright, but wouldn't mind talking about it.

(Online respondent)

There is a stigma attached to going to saunas which is why most guys prefer not to talk about it. Also there is probably a higher percentage of bisexual men that use them.

(Online respondent)

I wish they were rated for cleanliness.

(Online respondent)

Statistically, what percentages of gay men who pick up STIs do so at saunas?

(Online respondent)

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

OVERVIEW

What we learned from men about their experiences:

- There is a long history of men meeting other men for sex in the setting of saunas. Saunas operate in both Edinburgh and Glasgow.
- For some FAQ contributors saunas are perceived of as places where condomless anal sex is more likely to happen, generally that they are 'riskier' places. For other men they can be seen as places to meet men who do not identify as gay who they perceive to be at reduced risk of HIV infection.
- Many FAQ Interviewees and online contributors talked about saunas as a setting for increased risk of condomless anal sex and so HIV transmission. Sex in saunas might also include multiple partners.
- Despite concerns about condomless anal sex FAQ interviewees report that condoms and lube are available in most saunas.
- Saunas might also be a setting where men in open relationships meet others for sex.
- As sex takes place on premises, vulnerable men may be at increased risk in this setting.
- For some FAQ contributors risk of HIV/STI infection is increased by a lack of communication about safer sex (or condom use) and HIV status in the sauna setting.
- Men report that some men do not identify as gay or bisexual and that they might dissociate the person they are before heading to the sauna from the man who wants sex when there; in such circumstances choices and behaviour can put men at increased risk of HIV/STI infection.
- Saunas can be a setting for sexual violence.
- FAQ interviewees report that sexual health services are present in saunas in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, providing condoms and lube and sexual health screening.
- 1 in 4 men who responded to the FAQ Saunas survey do not attend sexual health services and only 1 in 10 have engaged with an outreach service in a sauna.
- Only 1 in 5 men who use saunas have ever discussed this at a sexual health service but just over half of me say they would do so.
- Men recognise that discussing saunas in a sexual health service setting might be difficult if they expect to encounter stigma which they perceive to be attached to the practice.

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

- HIV/Sexual Health clinical staff need to talk with men about their use of saunas. Useful conversations should be framed by an acceptance of saunas as a regular and important part of some men's sexual behaviour.
- Men are willing to discuss their use of saunas with clinic staff, but only when they can be sure that the response they receive will be open and non-judgmental.
- Services should explore how they can reach more men in the setting of saunas by providing HIV prevention information and testing.
- With bisexual men less likely to attend sexual health services, connecting with men in the setting of a sauna might be a key opportunity to engage them with services they can trust.

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 important questions. In terms of the FAQ findings reported in this chapter we pose these questions for practitioners:

- What are my personal feelings about men having sex in sex-on-premises venues such as saunas?
- How do I approach a man about his use of saunas?
- If a man is resistant to talking about using saunas, perhaps because of feelings of embarrassment or shame, how do I raise it and engage him in the discussion?
- How do I respond (verbally and in my body language) to reports of men with female partners using saunas to meet men for sex?
- How do I engage a man in conversation about condom use and other risk reduction strategies?
- What role does my service have in maintaining an open and constructive dialogue with sauna owners to develop a shared agenda for HIV prevention?

For more about the FAQ approach and project participants go to the **About FAQ** chapter at: www.faqscotland.co.uk

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Throughout the chapter direct quotes from participating men are **in blue**. When direct quotes are taken from an FAQ telephone interview it is possible to identify sexual orientation, age category and HIV status (actual or perceived); an internal interview code is also given. Quotes taken from online responses are labelled as such.

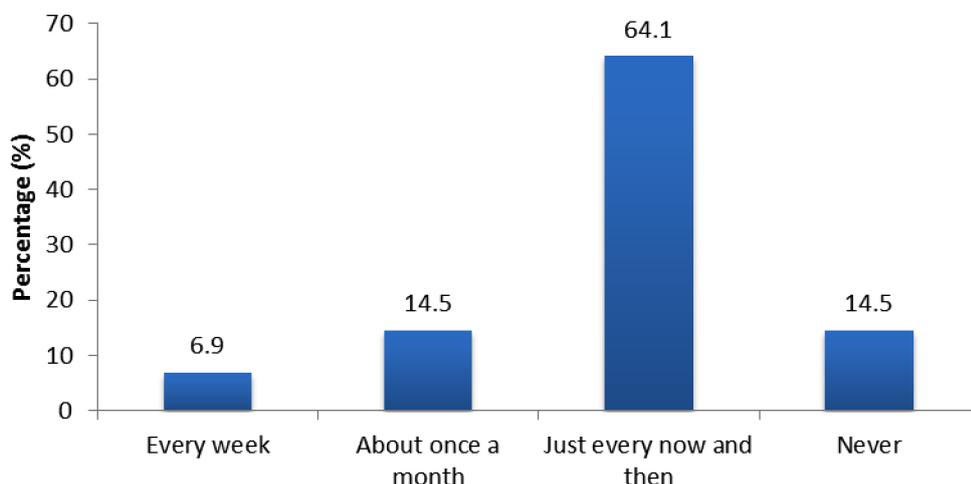
INVOLVING PARTICIPANTS

There is a long history of men meeting other men for sex in the setting of saunas. The sauna might have lockers, wet or dry sauna rooms, showers and small private rooms. The businesses are privately owned and men pay to enter the premises, sex between men is a private arrangement. Saunas operate in both Edinburgh and Glasgow.

FAQ is interested in the issue of men using saunas as a setting to meet other men for sex. In the context of a broad look at HIV prevention and service improvement we need to explore whether men who use saunas might need specific responses from HIV and Sexual Health services.

Men responded to questions about their use of saunas in FAQ telephone interviews and in an online survey called **Saunas**. Twenty-six of our FAQ interviewees talked about using saunas. Online, 145 men responded to the Saunas survey, they asked about how often they attended a sauna, while it is likely that this survey would attract men who use saunas 85% report they use saunas.

How often do you go to a sauna to meet other guys for sex?
(n=145)



FINDINGS

Saunas, sex and risk

Saunas remain a setting for some men to meet others for sex.

I go to them looking for sex and get what I am looking for.

(Online respondent)

For some FAQ contributors saunas are perceived of as places where condomless anal sex is more likely to happen, generally that they are 'riskier' places.

All my sex is safe when I'm sober. I'd like to think my judgement of people is good. Not doing risky. Maybe some bareback but not coming. I don't go to saunas or risky places. I don't mix in risky circles.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I2/019)

However, this is not always the perception; other men report that meeting a man in a sauna might be thought of as less risky than meeting someone in a bar. This may be because bisexual or married men (who are thought to be using saunas as the most anonymous way to meet other men for sex) are viewed by some gay and bisexual men as less likely to be on a 'gay scene' that might expose them to HIV; these perceptions and assumptions are discussed in more detail in the FAQ chapter called **HIV Status/Talking About HIV**.

I always use protection but many guys seem to think that people who frequent saunas are somehow cleaner than someone they meet in a bar.

(Online respondent)

Many FAQ Interviewees and online contributors talked about saunas as a setting for increased risk of condomless anal sex and so HIV transmission. Sex in saunas might also include multiple partners, particularly if the man intends to spend some time in the sauna.

Watch out for younger guys wanting bb, esp. after being in the pub.

(Online respondent)

Probably the sex I have out with the relationship is risky in saunas, so I realise it's a riskier context, having sex with guys who have lots of sex.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I3/023)

You let yourself go in a sauna if you have been drinking... more than you would normally... multiple contacts etc.

(Online respondent)

I'd had Conagra... If I'm going to go into a scenario of looking for sex and it might be several tries with different people, I would always take something like that to make sure I was performing.

(Bisexual, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/092)

... it was after we were all drunk that we decided to go to the sauna... I think there were a few, about 2 or 3 probably. Yeah, they all used them [condoms] One tried not to and I pushed them away. We didn't discuss but there is a kind of code that if they try it you can push them away.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/032)

Saunas also serve as a setting where men in open relationships meet others for sex.

Yes. Basically we have discussed if it's okay to visit saunas and again no anal sex and if that was to happen obviously protection would have to be used. But in general we haven't really found the need to do that. We're quite happy to have relaxed fun together with other guys.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I3/038)

He's my boyfriend. Together 9 months... We do threesomes every two or three weeks and when we go on holiday we have more. We go to the sauna occasionally.

(Gay, 36-45, HIV negative, I1/104)

One online contributor identifies risks associated with body fluids/used condoms but particularly for men with learning disabilities who might use such sex on premises venues.

Even when the owners do their best, you still very easily walk on puddles of cum, or touch used condoms by accident. It's also often a place where handicapped gay men go, and might be taken advantage of.

(Online respondent)

For some FAQ contributors risk of HIV/STI infection is increased by a lack of communication about safer sex (or condom use) and HIV status in the sauna setting. Men report that some men do not identify as gay or bisexual and that they dissociate the person they are before heading to the sauna from the man who wants sex when there, increasing the risk of HIV/STIs.

Sometimes it's the circumstances. If you're in a sauna it's not the thing. People don't talk... I'm sure they're furnished with statistics but are they aware of the amount of unprotected sex that's out there. If you go to a sauna, I would suggest that more than half is unprotected... When you go to these types of bars and saunas there is a lot of bareback sex going on and very few, one percent will tell you their status before they fuck you. There's very little discussion about status.

(Gay, 45+, HIV positive, I1/074)

When I go with someone they won't guess my status. But culture in the saunas is gung-ho, they'll bareback anything. 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're through the door and they want gratification. You get the ROAM guys in, there's condoms, lube, information everywhere. A lot of guys can't carry condoms or be prepared.

(Gay, 45+, HIV positive, I1/111)

A sauna can also be a setting for sexual violence as these contributors report. (More in the FAQ chapter **Violence** on this issue)

I went once but didn't like it. Because of the set up I think there is a high level of (undocumented and unreported) sexual assault - unwanted groping, touching etc.

(Online respondent)

Yes, not a regular, once at the sauna I'd consider I was raped. I was in a private room. I'd ejaculated, next thing I knew he had my legs up and penetrated me without protection. I told him to stop, tried to force him off, but he didn't stop. I said after 'I hope you're clean'. He just left quickly. It was just done. I couldn't get him off. It was a shock at the time. I told myself you did go with him; he just took it as license to do what he wanted.

(Gay, 45+ HIV negative, I2/048)

Condom availability in saunas

Despite concerns about condomless anal sex FAQ interviewees report that condoms and lube are available in most saunas.

Usually safe sex only, plenty condoms and lube available.

(Online respondent)

We just used them. It just happened. There were condoms readily available in the sauna. If he hadn't done that I'd have asked him to put one on.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/002)

Yes. There was condoms in all the areas, and it was just a matter of I expected it, for him to put it on. It kind of just happened. There wasn't really a big discussion.

(Bisexual, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/063)

Sexual health services working in saunas

FAQ interviewees report that sexual health services are present in saunas in both Glasgow and Edinburgh, providing condoms and lube and sexual health screening.

The sauna has good links with ROAM so there's a choice of condoms.

(Gay, 26-35, HIV negative, I2/023)

I think I seen a few in the sauna, in the locker room where you get changed and there are boxes with condoms.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I1/032)

Glasgow sauna has monthly testing sessions which is a really good idea.

(Gay, 45+, HIV negative, I3/048)

I took a test on Wednesday night and got my result yesterday and it was negative. I tested at the Steve Retson Project at the (name) sauna.

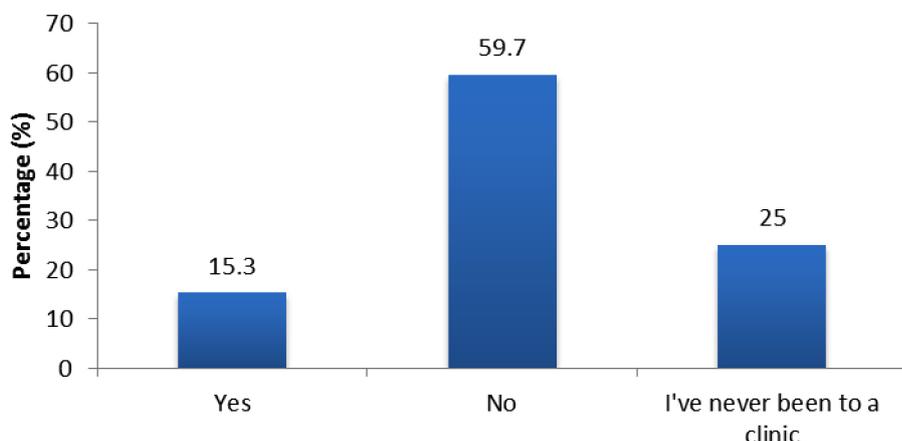
(Gay, 16-25, HIV negative, I1/050)

Via the FAQ online Sauna survey, we asked men if they had ever spoken with, received information from, or had an STI test provided by a sexual health outreach worker in a sauna; 16 men (11% of respondents) reported that they have. This small response might indicate a need to increase services in saunas to connect with men who have not yet been reached.

Talking with a sexual health service about using saunas

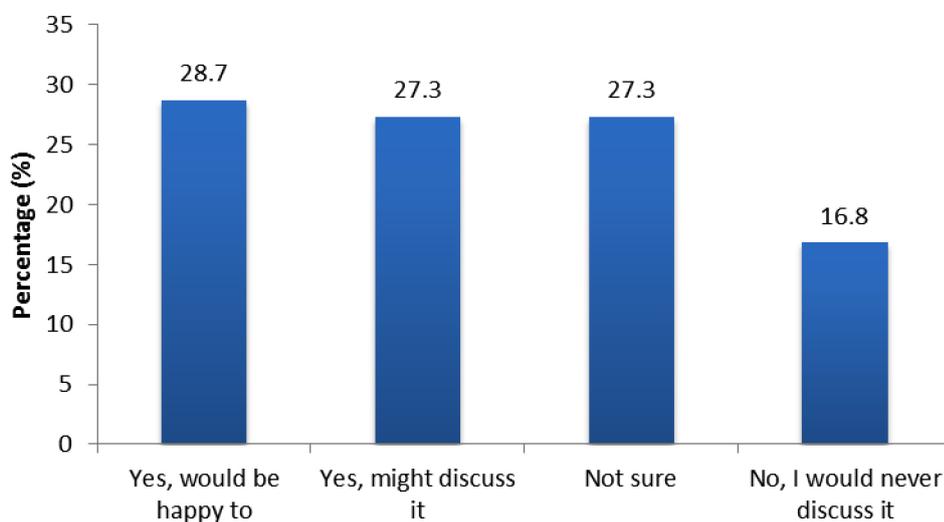
Men responding to the FAQ online Sauna survey were asked if they had ever, or would ever, discuss going to a sauna with a member of clinic staff. While 25% of respondents had never attended a clinic only a minority of those who have, ever had a discussion (15.3% of the total number of respondents but 20.3% of men who have ever attended a clinic).

Have you ever discussed going to saunas with someone at a sexual health clinic? (n=144)



When asked if they would have such a discussion just over half the men indicate they would or might do so, 1 in 4 remain unsure but only 1 in 6 say they would never discuss it. This suggests that in the clinic setting, the opportunity to discuss experiences of using saunas is available.

Would you ever discuss going to saunas with someone at a sexual health clinic? (n=143)



Exploring this data further we were interested to see whether or not there was a difference between gay or bisexual men and whether or not they would be willing to discuss going to saunas with someone at a sexual health clinic. The results suggest that similar proportions of gay and bisexual were as likely to respond that they would be willing to discuss attending saunas with a sexual health clinic worker (57.3% vs. 55.6%).

We were also interested to see if a certain age group of participants would be any more or less likely to be willing to discuss using saunas. The results suggest that older men (46+) were more likely than younger men (16-25) to report that they would be willing to discuss going to a sauna with someone at a sexual health clinic (73.9% vs. 34.4%).

Thinking about why there might be concerns about discussing saunas with a sexual health service men identified the need to be invited to have the discussion and recognise that sauna use may be stigmatised.

I would need to be asked outright, but wouldn't mind talking about it.

(Online respondent)

There is a stigma attached to going to saunas which is why most guys prefer not to talk about it. Also there is probably a higher percentage of bisexual men that use them.

(Online respondent)

Questions and suggestions for services

Via the FAQ online **Saunas** survey, we gave men space to ask any questions they would like to put to health workers who provide outreach services in sauna settings.

5 men asked questions about hygiene in saunas, and particularly risk of infections from shared facilities like Jacuzzis or shared baths. For example:

Can the Jacuzzi be contaminated with contagious illnesses?

(Online respondent)

Anything transmissible through contact/sharing pool, changing area etc. anything not protected by condom?

(Online respondent)

3 men asked questions about how to access HIV/STI testing, 3 men also asked questions about risks associated with oral sex, and a further 3 men questions about what STIs most commonly affect gay and bisexual men. For example:

How safe is oral sex?

(Online respondent)

How often should I get tested for STIs? Should I only get tested if I'm having symptoms?

(Online respondent)

2 men asked questions about the rates of HIV and STI infection amongst men who use saunas; 2 men asked questions about why more/a variety of condoms and lube are not available in saunas. For example:

How many of the people you test there come back HIV positive?

(Online respondent)

Statistically, what percentages of gay men who pick up STIs do so at saunas?

(Online respondent)

Why aren't there more condoms and lube?

(Online respondent)

Individual men asked questions on these themes: whether sexual health services provided in saunas are confidential; advice on enjoying anal sex; on how often men should test; on drug treatment and resistance to treatment; on whether there is a syphilis epidemic amongst men; and on why men chose to bareback.

Finally, with saunas as a setting where some men chose to meet others for sex some online respondents made suggestions as to how they might be improved; this includes improving cleanliness, that relationships with the Local Authority should improve and improving control of drug use.

I wish they were rated for cleanliness.

(Online respondent)

Should be more of them with a better attitude from the local authority.

(Online respondent)

Drug use not properly stopped.

(Online respondent)