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Facebook might be a good friend of HIV prevention.

December 4, 2013 By Kate Ferguson

Thanks to the Internet and smartphones, hooking up has never been easier. Researchers interested in HIV prevention believe it's important to reach out to those who seek sex in cyberspace and who may expose themselves to an increased risk of HIV.

A group of scientists tested the feasibility of using Facebook to increase HIV prevention and testing among youth ages 14 to 17, African Americans, Latinos and men who have sex with men (MSM)—population groups that are increasingly using the Internet and are also increasingly at risk of HIV.

In terms of HIV prevention, one potential downside of social media, according to the scientists, is that they facilitate large numbers of private hookups and risky behaviors.

But the upside is that the Internet is also anonymous. Because online hookups are so discreet, it's easier for MSM to disclose their HIV status and discuss safer sex and condom use long before they meet prospective partners in person. In addition, through online conversations, MSM can also avoid exposing themselves to incompatible partners who don't share their views about safer-sex issues.

The 12-week Facebook intervention study of 112 MSM, who self-reported being based in Los Angeles, showed potentially positive results. Study participants got HIV prevention information from peer leaders in Facebook groups they joined. In addition, upon their request the men were given home-based HIV testing kits. Scientists found that 44 percent of these men reported decreased sexual risk behaviors. What's more, the men said they found social networking communities a good way to receive HIV prevention messages.

But before this approach is validated, scientists say further research is necessary. Investigators want to evaluate the behavior of more people in this population group, confirm their location and include more social and sexual networking community sites in the study.

What's more, a 2011 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report suggests that successful online HIV prevention campaigns must be current, technologically relevant, able to provide sexually explicit information without restriction and must reach diverse groups of MSM.

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