

# Health

## Substance Abuse and AIDS

- Have you ever woken up in the morning in bed with someone and couldn't remember who it was or how you got there?

- After an evening drinking, do you sometimes go home with people you otherwise wouldn't have, or do something sexually you normally wouldn't?

- Are you frequently drunk, stoned, or high when you have sex?

- Do you find it difficult to socialize and meet new sex partners unless you've first "loosened up" with a few drinks or some drugs?

- Is sex more enjoyable or more intense for you if you mix it with alcohol, marijuana, or other recreational drugs?

If you answer "Yes" to any of these questions, your risk of HIV infection and AIDS may be increased.

Numerous studies have shown that the lesbian and gay communities have a high rate of use of mood-altering chemicals, not a surprising thing given the realities of surviving in a homophobic society. Socially enforced low self-esteem, the constant fear of discovery, discrimination and violence, and the central role of bars in gay social life all play a role in creating a high rate of alcohol and drug intake in our community.

But what does alcohol and drug use have to do with HIV/AIDS? Plenty.

First, and most directly, anyone who has shared needles with another person in the last decade has a significant risk for HIV. Using needles which have been in someone else's body, especially those used for intravenous injection, provide a direct avenue for infected blood to enter the bloodstream.

Intravenous use of heroin, cocaine, speed, ecstasy, and other drugs are no less common practices in the lesbian and gay communities than in the rest of the population. In fact, nearly 10,000 cases of AIDS in the U.S. have been diagnosed in men who are both gay/bisexual and have a history of needle use, approximately 7% of the total number of AIDS cases in the country. IV drug use is a very serious lesbian and gay health problem, a problem we deny and ignore as much as the rest of society.

Not as obviously, but quite seriously, the use of other drugs (including alcohol) can have a profound impact on our behaviors, and may lead us to put ourselves at risk sexually in ways we might not if sober.

Without going to the extreme of saying that everyone must adopt a "Just Say No"

attitude to the use of any amount of alcohol or drugs at any time, it is important to look realistically at the effect substance use may have on our behavior and on our health.

Practicing safer sex is a demanding and, at times, difficult thing, and one that frequently needs full attention. Many gay men report that even when they intended to follow safe sex guidelines, they sometimes slip up after drinking or using other drugs.

Alcohol and other drugs can impair judgment, remove inhibitions, and override social taboos. These very factors are among the reasons people cite for using them ("They help me relax...I'm more sociable when I drink...I could never get up the nerve to pick up a guy until I've had a couple of drinks...Sex is so much more intense when I'm high..."), but they are also the reason we are more likely to put ourselves at risk when using them.

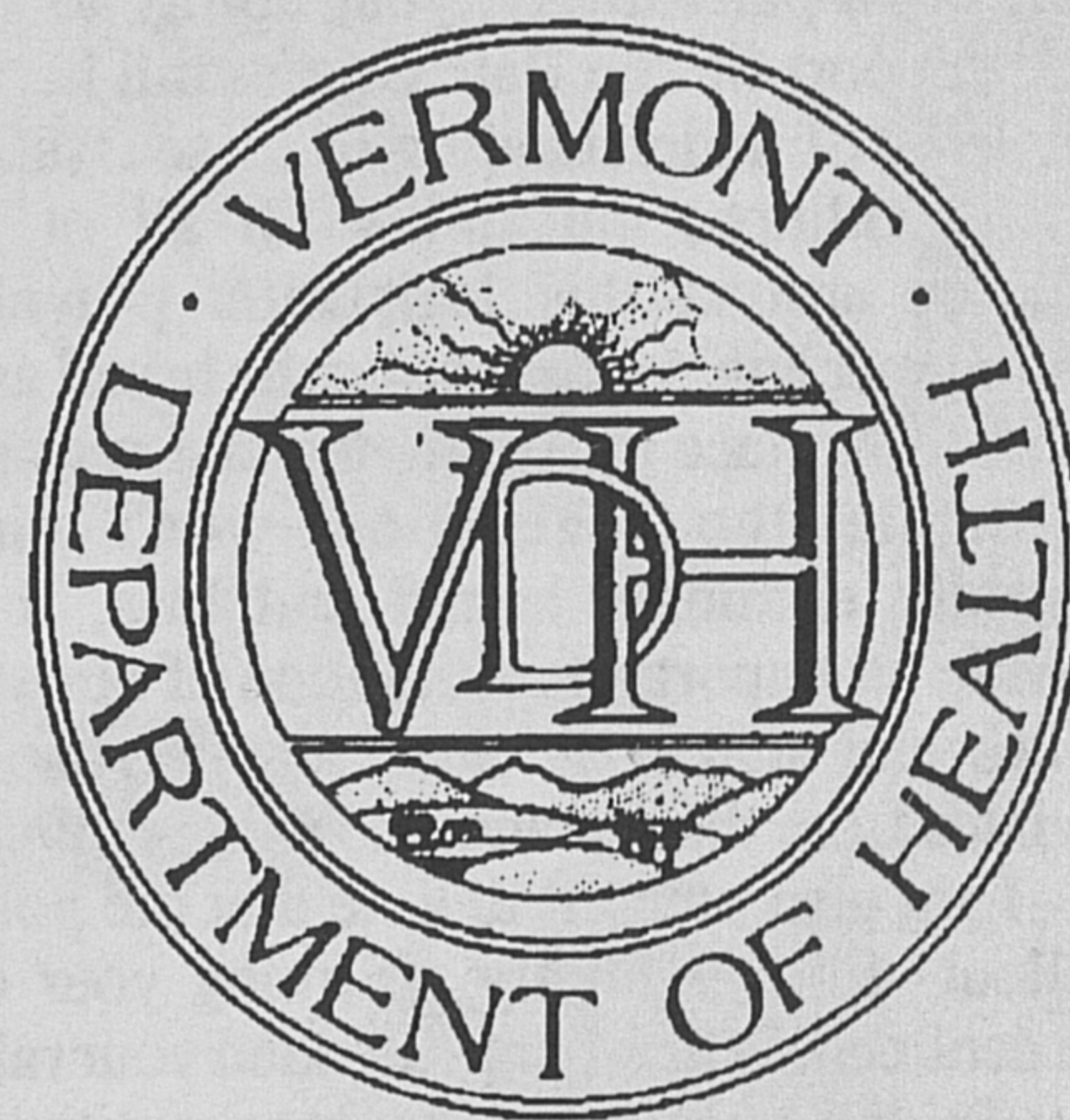
Some stimulants (like cocaine, amphetamines, and ecstasy), in addition to impairing judgment, produce periods of enhanced sexual drive, increased energy, and elevation of self-confidence and self-esteem. In other words, they make you hornier and make you more determined to act on that feeling.

The point isn't that any of these things are necessarily "bad," but rather that they can lead to very serious consequences. What we all need to do is look honestly at ourselves and decide if there is a relationship between our substance intake and sexual behaviors. Go back to the list of questions at the beginning of this article and think again about your activities in the last six months.

If, after reading them again, you are concerned that you may be putting yourself at risk, there are changes you may want to make.

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## For confidential AIDS Information



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