

On the Down Low in the Black Community



What does on the “down low” mean?

“Down low” or “DL” generally refers to Black men who consider themselves heterosexual but who also have sex with men without telling their female partners.

However, like many slang terms, DL means different things to different people. Some DL men identify as straight and have wives or girlfriends, but also secretly have sex with other men. Others are younger men who are still questioning or exploring their sexuality. Some are closeted gay or bisexual men—men who identify as gay or bisexual but who are not open about it. These men may exclusively have sex with other men, or with both men and women, but because of stigma towards gay people they stay closeted. And then there are African American brothers who openly have relationships with other men but reject the labels “gay” or “bisexual” because they are culturally uncomfortable with these terms due to tensions that exist between white gays and lesbians and Black gays and lesbians.

I never heard about the DL until recently. Is it something new?

DL is a new label for an age-old behavior among people of all races. Secret same-gender sexual relationships have existed throughout time and across all cultures. Currently, the release of a widely publicized book by J.L. King and the resulting media coverage (including King’s appearance on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*) focused attention on DL men and increased many Black women’s fears about HIV—as well as discussions about HIV in Black communities.

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How common is DL behavior? How many DL men are there?

We don't know. There is no data to support the size of the DL phenomenon which makes it hard to gauge the risk.

In surveys of men who have sex with men, between 15 percent and 30 percent of Black men identify as bisexual. About 14 percent of Black men who have sex with men in one survey reported that their main sexual partner was female. Studies of men who have sex with both men and women found high levels of unprotected sex among men of all racial/ethnic groups. However, this research looks at bisexual behavior—not necessarily DL behavior—and does not help determine how common DL behavior might be. When the behaviors of closeted Black gay or bisexual men are compared to white gay men, the Black men's behavior is slightly safer than the white men's behavior.

Why don't DL men just say they're gay?

Many DL men don't consider themselves gay. The term carries implications beyond sexual behavior. It is often used in a political, cultural and social sense (the "gay" community, "gay" rights, "gay" culture, etc.). Many Black men don't identify with or socialize in these settings. Social stigma, discrimination, prejudice, mockery, violence—there are numerous factors that may make men who have sex with other men—whether they also have sex with women or not—remain secretive about their true sexuality. In addition, there have been occasions where Black "gay" men have been the victims of violence because of their sexuality. Perceived or real, Black people often cite the historical lack of acceptance by institutions such as churches and mosques, civil rights organizations and community leaders as reasons to live on the DL.

Homophobia cuts across racial lines. One study that examined anti-gay attitudes found nearly identical rates of stigma among Blacks and whites. However, because of the additional burden of race bias, Black men may experience homophobia more severely than their white counterparts. Fortunately, Black leaders are now increasingly speaking out about how discrimination against people who engage in same-sex behavior is bad for everyone's health and well-being.

Are DL men infecting Black women with HIV?

The impact of HIV upon Black women is one of our community's greatest tragedies, but we don't know how much that has to do with men on the DL.

In 2002, the most recent year for which data exist, more than 70 percent of HIV cases in women were among African American women. And AIDS cases and deaths among Black women have historically been significantly higher than among white women.

Black women are primarily infected with HIV through unprotected sex with a man, and to a lesser degree through injection drug use. Many of these men may have been infected by sexual contact with another man or through injecting drug use. Some may have been infected while incarcerated or infected by women. They may not even know they are HIV-positive and may be unknowingly placing their sex partners—male and female—at risk of infection. Nationwide, it is estimated that as many as one-quarter of all people with HIV do not know they are infected.

It's difficult to know whether or not a man who transmits HIV to a Black woman is on the DL. Chances are there is some percentage of HIV-positive DL men (there is no data to indicate what percentage of DL men are HIV-positive) who do infect wives or girlfriends, but there is no data to indicate whether or not a rise in HIV infections is attributable to men on the DL.

The fact is, too many Black women aren't aware of their HIV risk. In one study conducted in Atlanta, 70 percent of Black women perceived themselves to have no or very little risk for HIV, even though 45 percent had not used a condom in the past two months and 60 percent did not know their partners' HIV status.

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Do guys on the DL use condoms?

We don't have any information about the safe-sex behaviors of men who specifically identify as being on the DL. Nor do we have any information on the HIV incidence among DL men or the HIV status of their male partners.

However, one study found that Black men who have sex with men but who are not open about their same-sex behavior were actually more likely than openly gay men to have used a condom with a male partner during sex. Another study found frequent high-risk behavior with all partners among young Black men who have sex with men and women. One thing is clear: A lot more research is needed to determine the extent of HIV risk behaviors among DL men.

How can men and women protect themselves from HIV infection?

Sexually active people who are not in a monogamous relationship, or who are not absolutely sure their partners are faithful, need to use condoms every time they have sex. They should also ask and answer questions about sexual history and desire honestly and openly. These questions are more likely to be answered truthfully when phrased in an open-minded, non-judgmental way. If you're unable to or feel unsafe talking to your partner about sexual history, you may want to reconsider being intimate with him or her altogether. Both men and women should set their own sexual boundaries and limitations prior to becoming involved with another person.

Finally, it's also very important to be tested for HIV and other STDs on a regular basis.

Should DL men be tested for HIV?

Yes, just like any other adult—man or woman, Black, white, Hispanic, Asian—who's sexually active and not in a long-standing mutually monogamous relationship. And those who continue to be at risk should test regularly. Black AIDS Institute supports the position that no one should be required or forced to get tested. HIV testing should always be voluntary and private, and should come with pre- and post-test counseling. (It's also best when it's free.)

Even in 2004, too many people remain unaware of their HIV status. Less than half of U.S. adults have ever gotten tested for HIV. And among all racial groups, too many people who are positive test late in the course of HIV infection, when medical treatments are less effective. The bottom line on HIV testing? Know your status.

Is the risk from DL behavior being blown out of proportion by the media?

It is vital that we recognize the toll that HIV has taken on our brothers and sisters, and that we protect ourselves from HIV infection (and if infected, protect our partners). But there is potential for the issue of DL to be misrepresented by some, resulting in us blaming or demonizing individuals unfairly.

The "blame and shame" strategy does not appear to be effective and may be putting both Black men and women at risk for HIV infection. Rather than placing blame, we need to encourage people who have sex to do so safely and responsibly. And instead of being distracted by a sensational story, we need to practice what we preach and take care of ourselves and our community. Remember, it takes two people to spread HIV, but only one to prevent it.

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For more information, contact:

Black AIDS Institute (Los Angeles)
213-353-3610
www.BlackAIDS.org

AmASSI Center (Los Angeles)
310-419-1969
www.amassi.com

The Black Men's Xchange (Los Angeles)
310-419-1961
www.home.earthlink.net/~blkembrace/nbbmx.htm

Brother to Brother (Seattle)
Down low Barbershop Project
206-726-1600
www.brotobro.com

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
HIV information 24-hour hotline: 800-342-AIDS
www.cdcnpin.org

National HIV Testing Resources
www.hivtest.org

The Night Ministry Project Vida's LINX Program (Chicago)
773-277-2291
www.thenightministry.org/serve/help1.htm

Sister Love, Inc. (Atlanta)
404-753-7733

Us Helping Us (Washington, D.C.)
Down Low Helpline: 888-547-3235
www.ushelpingus.com

Women's Collective (Washington, D.C.)
202-483-7003
www.womenscollective.org

Additional Resources

"HIV/AIDS Among Racial/Ethnic Minority Men Who Have Sex with Men—United States, 1989-1998," *MMWR*, January 14, 2000. 49(01); 4-11.

"HIV/STD Risks in Young Men Who Have Sex with Men Who Do Not Disclose Their Sexual Orientation—Six U.S. Cities, 1994-2000," *MMWR*, February 7, 2003. 52(05); 81-85.

Wohl, Amy Rock. "HIV Risk Behaviors among African American Men in Los Angeles County Who Self-Identify as Heterosexual." *JAIDS*, 31(3):354-360, November 1, 2002.