The National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) is an on-going series of studies that examine health and nutrition among adults and children in the U.S. As part of the survey in 2001-2006, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) researchers interviewed 4,319 men ages 18-59 about sexual behavior and tested them for HIV and HSV-2.

Just over 5% of the men reported ever having had any sexual contact with another male (referred to as MSM-Ever). Of these men, 44.5% identified as having homosexual or gay sexual orientation, 19.2% as bisexual, and 35.3% as heterosexual or straight.

The authors say male-to-male sexual contact, even if not recent, is an “important marker” for being at high risk for HIV. With MSM-Ever, overall HIV prevalence was 9.1%, compared to only 0.2% among men with no history of sexual contact with other males. HIV was detected among 16.5% of MSM-Ever who identified as gay, a rate roughly four times higher than found with bisexual MSM-Ever. No HIV infections were found among MSM-Ever who identified as heterosexual.

With HSV-2, prevalence among MSM-Ever was 18.4% (in those reporting male sexual partners
in the past year, prevalence was 19.6%). Differences in prevalence among MSM-Ever by sexual orientation, however, were not seen as significant. HSV-2 was detected in 12.5% of Non-MSM.

Approximately 17% of people in the U.S. ages 14-49 have HSV-2, and over one million people are living with HIV (with more than half of all new HIV cases occurring in MSM). The authors say that understanding behaviors and demographics of MSM are crucial in developing effective prevention and control programs.