KEEP HEALTHY, STAY SAFE, HAVE FUN AND KNOW YOUR RIGHTS AT MARDI GRAS 2019

As Sydney prepares to celebrate the 41st Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras this weekend, ACON – NSW’s leading HIV prevention, HIV support and LGBTQ health organisation – is encouraging revellers to look after themselves and their mates during the party season, especially in relation to HIV, sexual health, alcohol and other drugs, and street safety.

ACON CEO Nicolas Parkhill says an important part of Mardi Gras season is about ensuring health and safety is front of mind, whilst enjoying everything it has to offer.

“The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is all about celebrating our communities and having a great time doing it,” Mr Parkhill said. “Playing safe will help partygoers have a much more enjoyable Mardi Gras experience.”

Mr Parkhill said ACON recommends a range of measures for a healthy, fun and safe Mardi Gras.

Practice Safe Sex – Now There Are 3 Ways To Do It!
Condoms play a vital role in preventing the transmission of HIV and other STIs, and with 60,000 free ACON condom packs at LGBTI venues and events during the Mardi Gras season, it’s the cheapest and easiest way to stay safe. “However, if a person is HIV negative, they can now take PrEP, an antiretroviral drug that prevents HIV negative people from becoming infected,” Mr Parkhill said. “And if a person is HIV positive, it’s now proven beyond doubt that HIV treatments can help reduce that person’s viral load to an undetectable level, making it almost impossible to transmit the virus. There’s no longer a one size fits all approach to safe sex. We can now choose from a range of strategies – condoms, PrEP or UVL – to maximise sexual pleasure while protecting ourselves and our partners from HIV.” To find out more visit www.endinghiv.org.au.

PEP – Act Quickly!
If you think you’ve been exposed to HIV, PEP may prevent you becoming infected – if you act quickly. “PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis) is a course of anti-HIV medications taken over a four week period, but needs to be started as soon as possible after exposure – within 72 hours,” Mr Parkhill said. “PEP is NOT a substitute for safe sex – using condoms is always the best prevention.” More information is available via the 24-hour PEP Hotline: 1800 737 669.

Get Tested – Know For Sure
ACON operates a permanent rapid HIV testing facility on Oxford Street, Darlinghurst along with services in Surry Hills, Newtown and Kings Cross. “Rapid testing provides results within 30 minutes. a[TEST] Oxford St is located at 167 Oxford St and operates between 11am – 7pm, Monday to Saturday. Just walk in or make an appointment by visiting www.atest.org.au. Knowing your HIV status means you can take action to look after your health and the health of your partners. And getting more gay men to test more often is the only way we can reach our goal of ending HIV transmission in NSW, so I urge all men who have sex with men to get tested this Mardi Gras season.” a[TEST] services are confidential and free – no Medicare card is required to access a[TEST].
Cervical and Sexual Health Screening
The Check OUT clinic is a free and confidential sexual health and cervical screening clinic for LGBTIQ people operated by ACON, in partnership with Family Planning. Mr Parkhill said that it is important that ACON offers everyone within our communities a safe and inclusive place to have cervical and STI screening done. “As we have learnt from our successful a[TEST] clinics, peer leadership can be beneficial as it may make some people feel more comfortable and less anxious when talking to a peer about cervical screening and sexual health. Our Check OUT Clinic offers free or low cost, confidential sexual health and cervical screening services for LGBTIQ people. Everybody needs access to appropriate and specialist services to make sure they are getting the best healthcare.” To make a booking at the Check OUT Clinic, visit www.theinnercircle.org.au.

Alcohol and Drugs – Reduce Harm
Mr Parkhill said reducing the harms associated with alcohol and other drugs is also important. “There are often new drugs emerging or drugs that have different strengths. It’s important to tell someone you trust what you’ve taken, and to get help immediately if it’s needed. Also, the ACON Rovers will be at all the major parties to help people experiencing any difficulties.” You can find more safety tips regarding alcohol and other drug use and advice about partying safely via ACON’s Pivot Point website: www.pivotpoint.org.au.

Fair Play – Know Your Rights
“There will be significant police operations at selected Mardi Gras events, which will involve sniffer dogs and, in some cases, personal searches for drugs. If police want to search you, it’s best to cooperate and not show aggression as this behaviour has sometimes resulted in charges against people.” To help partygoers understand their legal rights during the Mardi Gras season, ACON, Mardi Gras and the Inner City Legal Centre support an initiative called Fair Play which involves volunteers being on hand at the Mardi Gras party to provide information on rights and legal support, offer emotional support and monitor police operations. Information about rights and safety is available on the Fair Play website: www.fair-play.org.au.

Street Safety – Report Violence
Mr Parkhill said keeping safe on the street is also key to having a great Mardi Gras. “To avoid homophobic and transphobic violence, we recommend partygoers travel to and from venues with friends, avoid responding to abusive behaviour as this can escalate violence and get to a safe place if they feel threatened. All violence and harassment should be reported to police for immediate action because if the types of violence are on the public record, then agencies such as ACON can lobby for improved security for our community.” Information on reporting violence to the police or to ACON is available on the ACON website: www.acon.org.au/what-we-are-here-for/safety-inclusion/

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