

EXPLORING ATTITUDES TOWARDS ANAL SELF-EXAMINATION FOR SYPHILIS DETECTION IN MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN: AN ONLINE ANONYMOUS CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY

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Background: Sustained epidemics of syphilis among men who have sex with men (MSM) call for additional strategies to improve control. Studies show MSM practising receptive anal sex are more likely to present with secondary syphilis, suggesting anorectal primary lesions are being missed. If men could detect anorectal lesions in the primary stage by regular anal self-examination (ASE), this might improve early diagnosis and treatment. This study aimed to explore MSM attitudes towards and previous experiences of performing ASE.

Methods: We conducted an online anonymous cross-sectional survey among MSM ≥ 18 years living in Australia. Men were recruited at the Melbourne Sexual Health Centre and social media between July and November 2020. Demographic information (age, gender, HIV, PrEP, education) were collected as well as sexual positions and previous syphilis infection. Descriptive statistics were performed, and men were categorised into two groups based on previous experience of ASE.

Results: In total, 574 MSM completed the survey (median age: 34 [IQR 27-45]): 183 (32%) had previously performed ASE. Among 374 (65%) who had never performed ASE, 250 (67%) would consider performing ASE if found to be beneficial. There were no significant differences in demographic characteristics and sexual practices between the two groups. Among those who had never performed ASE, 250 (67%) were willing to consider ASE as a regular practice for early syphilis detection with a preferred frequency of 2 times per month (IQR: 1-4), whilst MSM who were already performing ASE were performing at median 1 per month (IQR: 0.2-3). The commonly used or likely to use anal exam positions by MSM were (in order): standing, squatting, lying on the side and lying on the back.

Conclusion: Almost two-thirds of MSM who had never performed ASE were willing to adopt ASE practice in the future. Studies are required to explore the effectiveness of ASE.

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