

TRENDS IN WEEKLY USE OF PREP AND CONDOMLESS ANAL INTERCOURSE WITH NON-RELATIONSHIP PARTNERS DURING AND FOLLOWING COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS: RESULTS FROM THE FLUX STUDY OF GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN IN AUSTRALIA

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Background:

Following initial physical distancing measures to prevent COVID-19 transmission, many gay and bisexual men (GBM) simultaneously stopped having sex with non-relationship partners and stopped using PrEP. We investigate whether men (re)commenced PrEP prior to engaging in condomless anal intercourse with casual partners or fuckbuddies (CLAICF).

Methods:

In an online cohort of Australian GBM, between 3 May 2020 and 7 March 2021, 683 HIV-negative GBM completed up to 44 weekly surveys, with weekly responses ranging from 282 to 498. Questions included PrEP use and sexual behaviour.

Results:

CLAICF increased from 8.0% in week 1 (3-10 May 2020), of which 69.2% was protected by PrEP, to 18.9% in week 44 (28 February-7 March 2021), of which 78.9% was protected by PrEP. Overall, 32.1% of men were using PrEP at enrolment in the weekly survey, and 12.8% commenced, or recommenced, using PrEP sometime after enrolment. This included: 8.4% who did not engage in CLAICF without first using PrEP; 2.5% who engaged in CLAICF and then commenced PrEP use; and 1.9% who were using PrEP, subsequently stopped PrEP, and then engaged in CLAICF without PrEP protection. Other men (13.0%) engaged in CLAICF at some time but *never* used PrEP, 34.8% of whom reported doing so for just one weekly survey, while 20.3% did so at least four times.

Conclusion:

As COVID-19 restrictions have eased, Australian GBM have gradually increased their levels of sexual activity, with most (re)commencing PrEP proportionate to those increases in their own sexual activity. Nonetheless, a minority of men reported CLAICF without protection from PrEP, although usually not on multiple repeated occasions. Some men who ceased PrEP use during the weekly surveys subsequently engaged in sexual risk behaviours, suggesting that some men's decisions about discontinuing PrEP use may be precipitous.

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