

Analysing progress in the national HIV PrEP cascade by Australian gay and bisexual men: Results from the PrEPARE Project 2017–21

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Background: We developed an HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) cascade to assess coverage and barriers to use. We revised the cascade in line with current PrEP suitability criteria to assess progress and gaps in uptake.

Methods: National online surveys of gay and bisexual men (GBM) were conducted every two years. Responses from HIV-negative and untested participants were included. Trends in each cascade step were calculated. Reasons for not using PrEP at the biggest drop off in the cascade are reported.

Results: 3,371 responses from HIV-negative and untested GBM were included (1038 in 2017, 1148 in 2019, 1185 in 2021). Recent PrEP use increased from 23.3% in 2017 to 44.2% in 2021. In 2021, 76.3% of PrEP use was daily and 19.7% on-demand. There was improvement in most cascade steps:

1. Eligible/suitable – 54.7% in 2017, 56.8% in 2019, 58.0% in 2021 (p trend =.074)
2. Aware – 53.2%, 56.3%, 57.1% (p =.033)
3. Willing to use PrEP – 37.6%, 45.5%, 47.7% (p <.001)
4. Discussed PrEP with a doctor – 28.0%, 41.2%, 43.7% (p <.001)
5. Ever used PrEP – 22.4%, 37.9%, 41.4% (p <.001)
6. Using PrEP – 20.7%, 33.4%, 37.0% (p <.001)
7. Recently tested for HIV/STIs – 19.8%, 31.1%, 28.9% (p <.001)
8. Reduced HIV concern/increased confidence – 15.6%, 23.2%, 27.8% (p <.001)

Fewer PrEP users reported recent testing in 2021. The biggest drop off in the cascade remains willingness to use PrEP. For eligible, aware but unwilling participants in 2021, reasons for not using PrEP included not having enough sex (36.9%), concern about side effects (39.6%) or taking long-term medication (35.1%).

Conclusion: There has been significant improvement in the PrEP cascade with increased willingness to use it, discussions with doctors, and overall PrEP coverage. Recent testing by PrEP users has become less common, possibly reflecting COVID-19 and more non-daily use. Providing supportive, low-threshold pathways to access PrEP and discuss its use remains important for some GBM.

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