

WHY ARE SOME AUSTRALIAN GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN CHOOSING NOT TO INITIATE PrEP?

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Introduction:

Since 2016, clinical trials in Australia have allowed ~16,000 gay and bisexual men (GBM) to access pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). Despite this rapid uptake, we explore reasons why some GBM choose not to use PrEP.

Methods:

In 2018, 1686 HIV-negative/unknown GBM responded to surveys as part of their participation in a national cohort study. We used descriptive statistics to describe survey responses, and a thematic analysis of 549 free-text responses to describe reasons why they choose not to use PrEP.

Results:

The most common reason ascribed for not using PrEP among survey respondents was believing that they did not engage in 'risky' behaviours (55.5%). Free-text analysis revealed respondents felt that low risk included: a monogamous relationship, not having enough sex, avoiding anal sex, or consistently using condoms. Although rarely mentioned in the free-text responses, 29.4% of survey respondents believed PrEP was irrelevant because they had not had sex with HIV-positive partners.

One quarter (24.4%) were not on PrEP because it did not protect against other infections. This was also mentioned in the free-text responses, where some men were additionally concerned about other health-related outcomes, including perceived short-term and long-term side effects, and the prospect of taking medication when they were not unwell.

Free-text responses also indicated that some men avoided PrEP due to the value they ascribed to condoms and their reluctance to contribute to what they perceived as PrEP's normalisation of condomless sex.

Conclusion:

Many GBM perceive they are not at risk, but nonetheless require tools to ensure their self-assessment is correct. Fears about side effects may act as a barrier for some men who need PrEP. Community mobilisation around PrEP needs to account for concerns about community 'safe sex' norms and should be balanced against the countervailing potential for the community impact of PrEP on reducing HIV infections.

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