

EXPLORING CONDOMLESS ANAL INTERCOURSE PRACTICES AFTER STOPPING AND BEFORE RE-STARTING PREP AMONG GAY AND BISEXUAL MEN IN AUSTRALIA

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Background:

Some gay and bisexual men (GBM) engage in condomless anal intercourse with casual partners (CLAIC) after stopping pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), presenting a risk for HIV infection. We investigated GBM's practices relating to CLAIC after stopping and before re-starting PrEP.

Methods:

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 39 GBM who had taken breaks from PrEP or switched dosing schedules (July-2019 to February-2020). Interviews were analysed using thematic analysis.

Results:

About one-third of participants had engaged in CLAIC after stopping and before re-starting PrEP. Breaks ranged from a few weeks to one year. Some had one occasion of CLAIC, which prompted them to re-start PrEP. Others had multiple occasions before re-starting. Participants did not re-start PrEP before sex because: events were unexpected, they had no leftover pills, pleasure was prioritised over risk, and/or they believed the sex event would be low-risk. Most, including those who had leftover pills from when they stopped, did not know it is possible to re-start PrEP by taking a 2-pill loading 2-24 hours before sex and daily thereafter. Condoms were unpopular and not seen as a viable option for non-PrEP-protected sex events. Participants instead relied on sexual partners being on PrEP or on conversations about serostatus, viral load, and/or recent HIV testing. Those who had multiple CLAIC events did not re-start PrEP after events because: they believed the risk reduction strategies they adopted made the sex low risk or that the infrequency of CLAIC events meant they were not engaging in "enough" risk, and/or they reasoned that their most recent CLAIC event would be the last (until they eventually realised they should restart PrEP).

Conclusion:

Periods between stopping and re-starting PrEP can present HIV risks. Continued education about correctly re-starting PrEP is required, including education about the 2-pill loading dose. This may facilitate re-starting PrEP before CLAIC.

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