

Acceptability of different STI prevention strategies in a national sample of Australian gay and bisexual men: results from the PrEPARE Project 2021

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Background: Sexually transmissible infections (STIs) other than HIV have become more prevalent as gay and bisexual men (GBM) rely less on condoms and use HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) or treatment as prevention more often. We assessed the acceptability of a range of existing, potential, and perceived STI prevention methods.

Methods: A national online survey of GBM was conducted in April–June 2021. We asked participants how likely they would be to use the following strategies to prevent STIs: condoms, regularly taking low-dose antibiotics prior to sex (STI-PrEP), an antibiotic pill after sex (post-exposure prophylaxis), gargling with mouthwash after sex, and douching after sex. Some of these strategies are ineffective (gargling), may increase the risk of STIs (douching) or antibiotic resistance. We used multivariate logistic regression to identify the characteristics of participants interested in STI-PrEP, as it is being trialled in Australia.

Results: The mean age of 1,280 participants was 41 years, 80.8% identified as gay, 15.1% as bisexual. 82.7% were HIV-negative, 9.8% untested and 7.4% HIV-positive. 36.9% of the whole sample was using HIV-PrEP. The most acceptable STI prevention strategies were gargling with mouthwash (76.2%), an antibiotic pill after sex (70.0%), STI-PrEP (49.5%) and condoms (49.3%). A small minority (13.1%) douched after sex, attempting to prevent STIs. Participants who were interested in STI-PrEP were more likely to be born in Australia ($aOR=1.32$, 95%CI 1.02-1.70), taking HIV-PrEP ($aOR=1.32$, 95%CI 1.00-1.73), or diagnosed with an STI in the last year ($aOR=1.62$, 95%CI 1.19-2.21). They were less likely to be university educated ($aOR=0.63$, 95%CI 0.49-0.80).

Conclusion: In a national sample of Australian GBM we found high levels of interest in STI prevention, particularly simple or low-impact strategies (that may be ineffective) like gargling or taking an antibiotic pill after sex. Interest in STI-PrEP was concentrated among GBM who appeared to be suitable candidates for enhanced STI prevention.

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