

# THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 LOCKDOWN RESTRICTIONS ON SEXUAL PRACTICES, PREP USE AND PREP FOLLOW-UP: A CLINIC-BASED SURVEY OF PREP USERS IN SYDNEY, AUSTRALIA

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## Background:

We evaluated the effect of COVID-19 restrictions on use of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and follow-up services.

## Methods:

During July-December 2020 (following April-June COVID-19 lockdown in Sydney, Australia) we conducted a cross-sectional, online survey of PrEP clients at Western Sydney Sexual Health Centre. Changes in sexual practices, self-perceived HIV risk, use/cessation of PrEP and sexual health services during and after (versus 12 months before) the lockdown were assessed using generalised estimation equations and logistic regression. We present Odds Ratios and 95% Confidence Intervals (OR, 95%CI).

## Results:

Among 189 PrEP users (98.4% gay men; mean age 36 years; 80.4% on Medicare), the lockdown was associated with having no casual partners (OR=17.10; 95%CI:6.09-48.02) and decline in anal sex (OR=0.10; 95%CI:0.06-0.19), oral sex (OR=0.26; 95%CI:0.18-0.40) and chemsex (OR=0.34; 95%CI:0.20-0.58). Those continuing sex with multiple partners did not change their condom practices. A third of PrEP users stopped PrEP but later resumed it. Patterns of use changed: event-based use (EB-PrEP) increased during (OR=2.65; 95%CI:1.72-4.09) and after the lockdown (OR=3.28; 95%CI:2.16-5.00). About a third (29.2%) of EB-PrEP users never discussed their change of PrEP schedule with clinicians. A third of PrEP users experienced disruption of regular STI testing and 78% wanted to return to face-to-face appointments.

## Conclusion:

Among PrEP users, sexual practices were impacted by COVID-19 restrictions but quickly rebounded. A concurrent shift to EB-PrEP and disruption of regular PrEP follow-ups is concerning. Flexibility in PrEP follow-up is warranted; however, high patient literacy of different PrEP schedules is required to maintain gains in HIV prevention due to PrEP.

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