

The impact of COVID-19 on sexual behaviour, PrEP use, and healthcare access among gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men in Canada: Preliminary Findings from Engage-COVID-19

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Introduction

- Engage-COVID-19 is a mixed-method study collecting biobehavioural data to understand the impacts of COVID-19 on gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men (GBM) living in Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal.
- In this preliminary analysis we describe COVID-19 testing patterns and results across provincial contexts during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We provide an overview of how COVID-19 has impacted the sexual behaviours, PrEP use, and healthcare access of GBM.

Methods

- Beginning in 09/2020, we asked Engage Cohort Study participants COVID-19-specific questions.
- GBM were asked how their sexual activities between 03/2020 to the end of 05/2020 changed when compared with before 03/2020.
- Data were collected from 1,161 participants as of 03/2021 and is ongoing (Vancouver=299, Toronto=195, Montreal=667).
- We report frequencies of responses to key questions. Our preliminary analysis did not control for other factors.

The COVID-19 pandemic led to changes in the sexual behaviours and PrEP use of many GBM in Canada.

Results

COVID-19 Testing and Diagnosis

- At the time they completed the survey (09/2020-03/2021) 53.4% of 1144 participants had never been tested for COVID-19.**
 - Never tested: 70.9% in Vancouver (209/295), 48.4% in Montreal (319/659), 40% in Toronto (76/190)
- Of those tested for COVID-19, 43 (7.9%) reported a positive test result.**
 - Positive COVID-19 test (self-report): 9.4% in Montreal (32/340), 8% in Toronto (9/113), 2.2% in Vancouver (2/90)

Sexual Behaviours

- Compared with before the COVID-19-pandemic, participants reported increased engagement in physically distanced sexual activities (e.g., more camming (47.4%), sexting (38.9%), solo masturbation (48.1%)).**
- GBM reported decreased behaviours that may increase risk for COVID-19 exposure (e.g., less in-person sex with new casual partners (68.2%), less engaging in group sex play (69.5%), and less meeting guys outside their household for sex (72.9%)).**

PrEP Use

- Half (49.5%) of GBM taking PrEP said COVID-19 did not impact their use.**
- However, 20.2% stopped using PrEP completely and 18.4% switched from continuous to on-demand use.**
 - Stopped PrEP completely: 28.1% in Toronto (18/64), 19.3% in Montreal (26/135), 17.2% in Vancouver (21/122)
 - Switched to on-demand: 21.9% in Toronto (14/64), 20% in Montreal (27/135), 14.8% in Vancouver (18/122)

Health Service Access

- Only 6.4% of GBM living with HIV reported COVID-19 negatively impacted their access to HIV care.**
- One third (32.8%) of participants reported avoiding health services because of concerns about COVID-19 exposure.**

Conclusions

- The COVID-19 pandemic led to changes in the sexual behaviours of many GBM, with participants reporting reduced in-person sexual behaviours that may increase the risk for COVID-19 exposure.
- Some participants reported changes in their PrEP use, including stopping or changing to on-demand use.
- Preliminary analysis points to higher COVID-19 testing and positive diagnoses in the Montreal and Toronto Engage sample as compared to the Vancouver sample.
- Our preliminary findings also point to significant healthcare access disruptions.

Further information

Please contact Daniel Grace at daniel.grace@utoronto.ca or visit our study website: <https://www.engage-men.ca>