

Different post-COVID-19 recovery in HIV testing according to PrEP use among gay and bisexual men attending clinics in a surveillance network in Australia

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Background:

Interruptions to healthcare during COVID-19 may have ongoing impacts on HIV testing. We examined recovery in HIV testing post-COVID-19 restrictions among gay and bisexual men (GBM), stratified by PrEP use and region of birth.

Methods:

HIV test and PrEP prescription data among GBM ≥16 years were extracted from 22 Victorian and NSW clinics participating in ACCESS from 01/01/2019-31/12/2023. Quarterly number of HIV tests, and annual HIV test uptake (proportion of attendees tested at least once) and mean tests per person were calculated and stratified by PrEP-related tests (within 28 days of PrEP prescription) and region of birth (Australia, Asia, South/Central America). Poisson regression computed rate ratios comparing mean quarterly testing in 2023 with 2019.

Results:

Between 2019-2023, 272,467 HIV tests were performed among 63,699 GBM; quarterly tests declined from 18,741 in Q1-2019 to 10,000 in Q2-2020, before increasing to 14,933 by Q1-2023. A 27% decline in HIV tests occurred between 2019-2023 (RR=0.73, CI:0.72-0.74), with reductions greater for non-PrEP-related tests (RR=0.65, CI:0.64-0.66) than PrEP-related tests (RR=0.84, 95%CI:0.83-0.86), and similar for Australian (RR=0.71, CI:0.70-0.72) and Asian-born GBM (RR=0.72, CI:0.70-0.74). Recovery in testing in 2023 was greater among Central/South American-born GBM (RR=0.94, CI:0.90-0.99). Between 2019-2023, annual test uptake dropped from 79% to 72%, and from 69% to 56% among GBM never prescribed PrEP. Mean tests per attendee dropped from 2.1 to 1.9/year, with similar trends by region of birth. Of the 33,702 GBM tested in 2019, 10,405 (30.8%) had no subsequent test recorded by 31/12/2023; 85.9% weren't linked to PrEP at their last test.

Conclusions:

Sustained reductions in HIV testing since COVID-19 restrictions eased are being driven by less non-PrEP-related HIV testing and less frequent testing among GBM.

Reduced HIV testing among GBM not using PrEP may impact undiagnosed HIV prevalence and undermine Australia's goal of virtually eliminating HIV transmission.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: