

PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS USE AND KNOWLEDGE IN YOUNG MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN NEW ZEALAND

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Background: In 2017, 26% of new HIV diagnoses among men who have sex with men (MSM) in New Zealand were found in individuals younger than 30. Young MSM constitute a population that may experience unique health challenges. Anecdotal evidence suggests that pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) uptake in this group is lower than in older men, however limited local data exists to support this claim. This paper aims to capture the age differences in PrEP use and knowledge in New Zealand.

Methods: Participants were recruited for the 2018 Test Often survey through advertising in social media, dating apps, and websites targeting MSM. They were asked to complete an anonymous questionnaire about their sexual practices, HIV prevention methods, attitudes, and sexual health knowledge.

Results: Of the 902 MSM who completed the questionnaire, 759 were HIV-negative or did not know their status and disclosed information about their sexual practices. Of these, 177 (23%) were aged 16-24 and 582 (77%) were 25 or older. After controlling for recruitment source, region, and ethnicity, younger men were found to be less likely to use PrEP than older men (AOR=0.53, 95% CI: 0.30-0.92). Young age was associated with being unaware that PrEP did not protect from other STIs (AOR=0.57, 95% CI: 0.37-0.88), but it was not significantly associated with knowing that it reduced the risk of HIV (AOR=0.65, 95% CI: 0.42-1.01). Among participants using PrEP, younger men were more likely to access it through importing generics (AOR=5.00, 95% CI: 1.17-21.31), therefore carrying its financial burden.

Conclusion: Significant sexual health challenges remain in the population of New Zealand young MSM. Lower rate of PrEP use, gaps in knowledge, and less access to subsidized medication justify the need for age-specific interventions and campaigns. More research is needed to understand the exact mechanisms leading to poorer PrEP uptake in young MSM.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

New Zealand AIDS Foundation is a registered Charitable Trust funded through New Zealand government and private donations and granting bodies. No pharmaceutical grants were received in the development of this study.