

Impact of COVID-19 on Sexually Transmitted Infections and Nurse-led HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) Initiation and Retention at Cool Aid Community Health Centre for Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM)

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Offering PrEP at Cool Aid Community Health Centre

Gay, bisexual and MSM continue to comprise the greatest number of new HIV diagnosis in British Columbia (BC)¹. STI screening and treatment has provided opportunities to explore HIV risk with MSM and assess if BC publicly funded PrEP is an appropriate intervention strategy. COVID-19 has had major sexual health implications for all Canadians, including target groups for PrEP.

This novel Community Health Centre based Men's STI Testing Clinic is staffed by STI certified practice nurses and run in partnership with the AVI Health and Community Services Men's Wellness Coordinator. In the first year of the British Columbia PrEP Program in 2018, our nurse-led model enrolled 124 gbMSM². PrEP starts have decreased with 57 in 2019, 31 in 2020 and 26 in 2021. To date, there have been no HIV infections amongst PrEP recipients.

COVID restrictions have meant a closure of Men's Testing Night and limited access to in-person testing, with longer (120 vs 90 day) prescriptions for PrEP.



Impacts of COVID

From January 2019 until the COVID lockdown in March 2020, an average of 35.3 monthly STI screenings were completed with 3.3 positive rectal chlamydia and/or gonorrhea and syphilis results per month. These positive results are markers for an increase in risk of acquiring HIV.

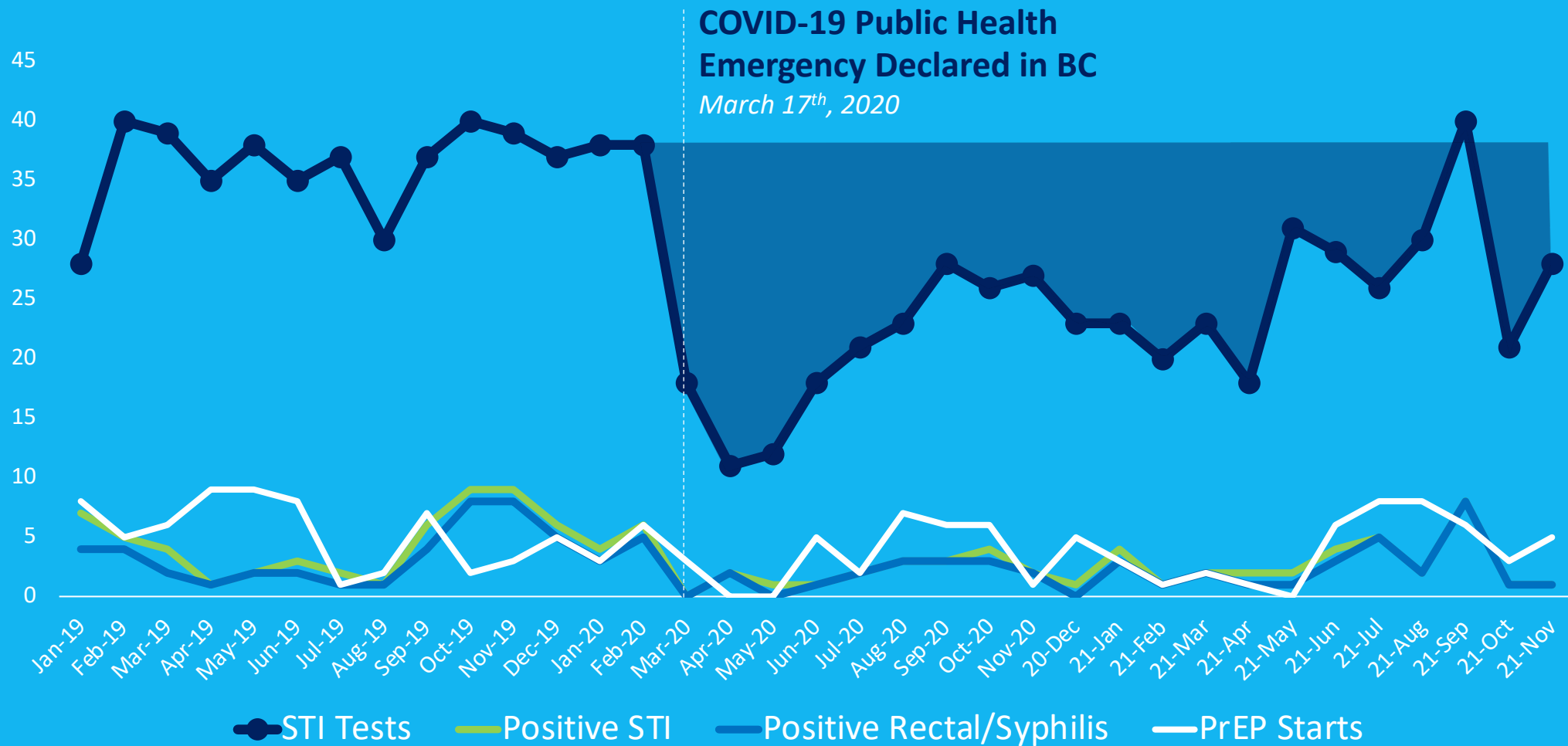
In the same time frame, an average of 5.1 clients were started on PrEP per month.

In the first six months of COVID restrictions, average monthly STI tests fell to 18, with 1.8 monthly positive rectal chlamydia and/or gonorrhea and syphilis tests and 3.3 PrEP starts.

While STI Testing was significantly correlated with PrEP starts ($r = 0.417$, $p < 0.0126$), positive STI tests were not ($r = 0.242$, $p = 0.162$)

In total, just 52 (28.7%) of those who started on PrEP in 2018-19 have continued on PrEP.

The Impact of COVID-19 on gbMSM's STBBI Testing at the Cool Aid Community Health Centre



Conclusion

While there has been an increase in connection to STI testing and PrEP as COVID restrictions have lifted, the rate of positive STI's continues to impact the sexual health of this population. Exploring the patterns of re-enrollment and intermittent use of PrEP requires more nuanced data collection and analysis. More work is needed to ensure that barriers to finding out about, starting and staying on PrEP are reduced in our community.

To learn more about our PrEP program, please reach out to:

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References

1. BC Centre for Disease Control. (2019). HIV in British Columbia: Annual Surveillance Report 2017. Retrieved from <http://www.bccdc.ca/health-professionals/data-reports/hiv-aids-reports>
2. Selfridge, M., Card, K. G., Lundgren, K., Barnett, T., Guarasci, K., Drost, A., ... & Lachowsky, N. J. (2020). Exploring nurse-led HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis in a community health care clinic. *Public Health Nursing*, 37(6), 871-879.