

# Trends in Awareness and Use of HIV PrEP among Gay, Bisexual and other Men who have Sex with Men in Vancouver, Canada 2012–2016

In this study conducted before the start of the provincial PrEP program, low rates of PrEP usage were observed.

## What is the BC-CfE Momentum Health Study?

Evidence from British Columbia and elsewhere has demonstrated the expansion of access to antiretroviral HIV treatment (ART) can result in population-level reductions in HIV incidence. This is the concept behind the made-in-BC Treatment as Prevention® strategy, or TasP®, which aims to expand early HIV testing and treatment to improve patients' health and curb the spread of HIV. Gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) represent the most affected HIV risk group, both in BC and Canada. The BC-CfE Momentum Health Study is designed to measure changes in HIV risk behaviour, attitudes toward TasP® and the proportion of HIV-positive gbMSM with unsuppressed viral load over time in the Vancouver region. The study uses respondent-driven sampling (RDS) to obtain a more representative sample reflecting the diversity of the gbMSM community in Vancouver.

## FACT BOX

Over the course of the study period, participants in the BC-CfE Momentum Health Study reported increasing awareness of the HIV prevention drug, PrEP.

## What are the key study findings?

- Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is an oral antiretroviral medication that HIV-negative individuals may take either daily or on-demand before potential HIV-exposure to reduce the risk of acquiring HIV.
- In several studies, PrEP has been shown to be a highly efficacious method for preventing HIV infection among gbMSM.
- Among our sample of 732 gbMSM, awareness of PrEP increased over the span of four years (from 2012–2016): from 18% to 80% among HIV-negative men and from 36% to 77% among those living with HIV.
- At the end of our study, roughly 4 out of 5 gbMSM were aware of PrEP with similar rates of awareness found among both those living with HIV and those who were HIV-negative.
- During the first study visit, no participants reported using PrEP in the previous six months. Throughout the rest of the study, only eight HIV-negative individuals reported using PrEP at some point.
- Studies have shown comparable levels of PrEP awareness between Canada and the United States, suggesting a strong interest in PrEP within Canada.



## What do these findings mean?

- Given the proven efficiency of PrEP, it could play an important role in overall reduction of HIV incidence amongst gbMSM.
- Low usage of PrEP in this study may be due to the lack of approval for PrEP by Health Canada during the study period, high costs associated with using PrEP and the relative difficulty in obtaining coverage through private insurance providers.
- Findings suggest a portion of HIV-negative gbMSM who engage in riskier sex have increased their sexual health knowledge. This is an opportunity to assess whether gbMSM find such information easy to access and whether their sexual health information needs are being adequately met.
- While awareness of PrEP has increased, many gbMSM who are currently at high-risk may not perceive themselves as such and may not seek out PrEP. It is important to adequately identify high-risk gbMSM, in order to educate them about PrEP and refer them to it.
- These findings have implications for policymakers, program planners, physicians and researchers, particularly in regards to implementing education and other programs to expand PrEP uptake.
- Our study is limited in that it did not assess participants' interest or willingness in using PrEP, nor their attitudes towards it or access to it.
- Additionally, our sample is from the Greater Vancouver, which may limit the generalizability of the results to gbMSM in other areas.

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