

HARiS - HIV and AIDS Response Indicator Survey 2020 for Men who have Sex with Men

Background

Men who have sex with men (MSM) has continued to account for a significant proportion of newly acquired HIV infections in Hong Kong. To keep on tracking the epidemic and inform intervention, MSM population has been included as one of the five major at-risk populations in the HIV/AIDS Response Indicator Survey (HARiS).

The aims of HARiS were to establish a community-based behavioural survey with collection of standardized strategic information; to provide data of a pre-defined set of core indicators among the major at-risk subpopulations for surveillance of HIV-related risk behaviours and HIV testing patterns; and to enable the indicators to be tracked and compared over time for evaluation of the coverage and effectiveness of health-promotion and surveillance programmes in Hong Kong.

The eighth round of survey was conducted in 2020 via commissioning to the Department of Sociology, The University of Hong Kong.

Methods

Participants were recruited via centre-based HIV Voluntary Counselling and Testing (VCT) services (by 7 Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and outreach sessions (by 1 NGOs) from May to August 2020. Any man who had ever had oral or anal sex with another man was eligible in the survey and be invited to complete a self-administered questionnaire. An online version of the questionnaire was also developed and disseminated by 3 NGOs during internet outreach programmes.

Results

A. Characteristics of participants

A total of 1574 MSM (centre-based: 1257; outreach: 6; online: 276) were recruited via the 7 supporting NGOs. A vast majority was Chinese (95.2%), aged between 20 and 39 (79.8%); of the 1541 respondents who had been asked, 1498 (97.25%) have stayed in Hong Kong for more than 3 months in the preceding 6 months.

B. Sexual behaviours and use of condoms with different kinds of sex partners

In the preceding 6 months, 49.6%, 47.6% and 54.4% of the respondents reported to have had anal sex with emotional relationship partners (ERP), regular sex partners (RSP) and non-regular sex partners (NRSP) respectively. The condom use rates in the last anal sex were 52.2%, 62.2% and 69.8% with ERP, RSP and NRSP respectively. Only 5.7% of the participants had had sex with commercial male sex partners (CSP), and the condom use rate in last anal sex was 74.2%.

The use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) was first asked as an alternative option of HIV prevention in this survey. The rates of condom use and/or PrEP use before/after last anal sex were 57.8% (ERP), 67.7% (RSP), 74.6% (NRSP) and

80.8% (CSP) respectively. For those who used PrEP before/after the last anal sex with his partner(s), it was found that they had a lower condom use rate with ERP/RSP/NRSP but not CSP.

C. HIV testing behaviours

Of all 1574 respondents, 1287 (81.9%) had ever received HIV test and of the 1275 respondents who had been asked, 1262 (98.9%) knew their last test results. However, only 963 (61.3%) had their last test in the preceding 1 year. Of these, only 944 (60.0% of total respondents) knew their last HIV test results.

The most commonly reported venue for last HIV test was NGOs (68.2%), followed by public service sector (social hygiene clinics, public hospitals/clinics or Kowloon Bay Integrated Treatment Centre) (10.6%) and self-test (9.0%).

D. Use of recreational substances or drugs

Among all respondents, 8.6% reported to have taken recreational drugs or substances before or during sex (chemsex/chemfun) in the past 6 months. The commonest drug used is poppers (70.9%), ice (48.0%) and GHB (40.2%). Chemsex users reported a higher HIV testing rate than non-chemsex users. Also, nearly one-fourth (24.4%) of chemsex users had used PrEP in the past 1 year, which was statistically higher than that of non-chemsex users.

E. Use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)

Among all respondents, 6.3% of them had taken PrEP within the past 12 months, which was much higher than that in 2018 (1.1%). Only 9.3% respondents had never heard of PrEP, compared with 26.3% in 2018.

Discussions

1. The overall percentage of condom use in the last anal sex with ERP was only 52.2%, which was decreased compared to the findings of HARiS 2018 (60.2%) result. The percentage of condom use at last anal sex with CSP also dropped from 78.6% in 2018 to 74.2% in 2020. Patterns of condom use with NRSP and RSP also decreased similarly. With a higher awareness and usage of PrEP among MSM, the respondents might have used PrEP as an alternative/additional approach to protect themselves from HIV. To protect from other STIs and viral hepatitis, health promotion on safer sex with consistent condom use with all partner types needs to be strengthened in the MSM community.
2. Overall ever HIV testing rate (81.9%) and HIV testing rate in past one year (61.3%) dropped slightly, as compared to findings of 83.0% and 64.5% in 2018. Despite the constraints in the time of COVID-19, effort to promote annual HIV test for all MSM should be maintained in the MSM community. HIV self-testing, as an additional testing option, should be promoted to enhance the testing coverage.
3. The use of drugs during sex (chemsex) should not be neglected. Literature generally showed that chemsex was associated with lower drug (anti-retroviral) compliance and increased unprotected sex, which could increase HIV, hepatitis B and C and STI transmission among MSM. This survey revealed that chemsex users had a higher PrEP usage and a higher testing rate, which may be due to their higher perceived risk of acquiring infection.

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