

Heterosexual men in South Africa should be a target population for PrEP, based on HIV risk and PrEP interest, uptake and continuation

Title: Characterising heterosexual men's demand for and uptake of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention in South Africa

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Background

While most PrEP programs focus on reaching men who have sex with men, this study aimed to assess whether high-risk heterosexual men may also be a strategic target population for PrEP in relation to the goal of achieving epidemic control. We enrolled 562 heterosexual men on PrEP with the aim of assessing their demographic and behavioural characteristics, interest in PrEP, and experience of PrEP use.

Methods

Data were collected under a demonstration project in Johannesburg, South Africa. Health promoters engaged men in public spaces to discuss PrEP and refer them to services. Private doctors then provided HIV testing and PrEP at no cost to clients. We collected routine intake and monitoring data on 562 men from September 2021 through June 2022 and conducted in-depth interviews with 34 men. 59% of participants were between ages of 25-39 years. All research was approved by the Foundation for Professional Development Research Ethics Committee (FPDREC Ref 03/2021).

Results and discussion

Awareness of PrEP was low, but interest was high

We found low awareness and poor understanding of PrEP but high levels of interest upon engagement with health promoters. Among those reached with demand creation, only 20% had ever heard of PrEP. However, 92% were interested in learning more about PrEP, and 56% expressed interest in trying PrEP.

Many of the men who had previously heard of PrEP thought it was only for women or adolescents. Some confused PrEP with PEP. Engaging with the fieldworkers also helped to clarify misconceptions around PrEP, PEP and ART.

"It was so taboo in a sense that I didn't even bother to know more about it, like the same way I don't really know about ARVs. I know that there is a pill called ARVs so I knew there was a pill called PrEP, but I didn't understand how it works. And it is different, like these PrEP and PEP, so those things, let me say when I went there I knew it existed but I didn't know its purpose and functionality."

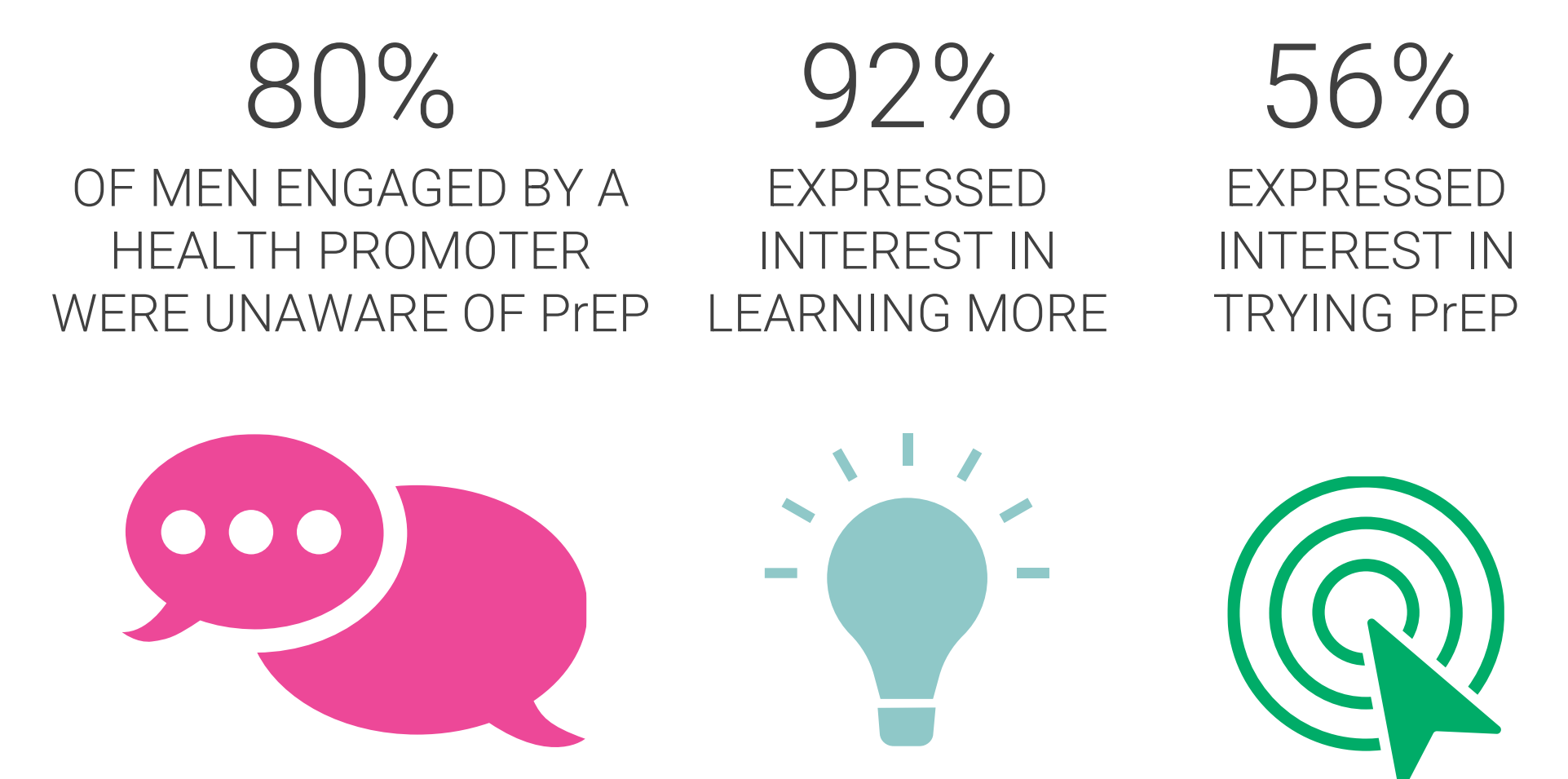


Figure 1: Men's awareness of PrEP

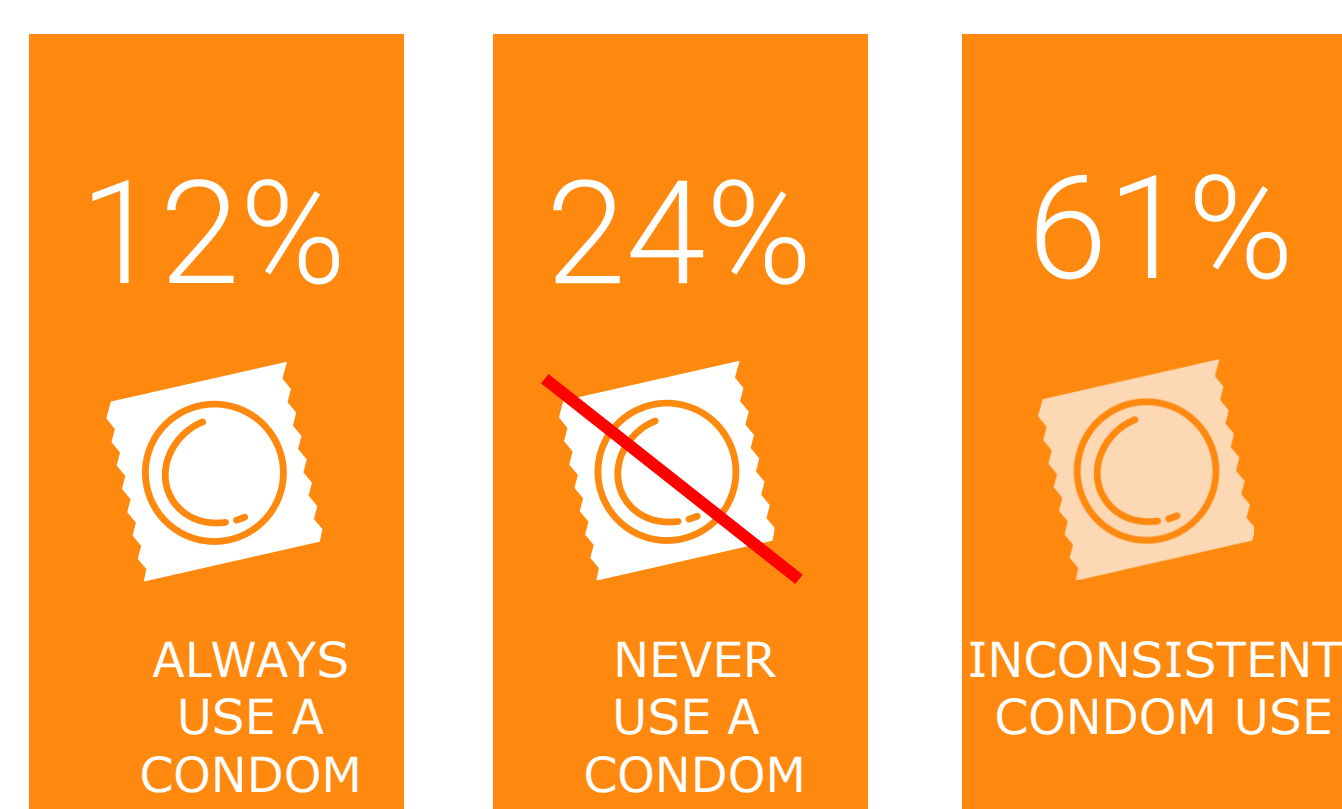


Figure 2: Condom use

Condom use was low and inconsistent

Although cited as their primary HIV prevention method, men's condom use was low and inconsistent.

Among men who initiated PrEP during the pilot, only 12% reported consistent condom use, with 24% never using condoms, and 61% using them inconsistently.

Most men reported multiple sexual partners, some under 25

72% of the men in the pilot reported having more than one sexual partner in the past three months, with 45% reporting three or more. 68% reported at least one partner under 25 years of age.



Figure 3: PrEP users sexual partners

"I just want to be safe...I only have one chance in life, so I want to use that chance."

Men demonstrated willingness and ability to use PrEP

Among the 562 men initiated on PrEP, we found promising patterns of effective PrEP use, with participants not always using PrEP continuously but using it in ways that were aligned to their needs and priorities, e.g., pausing PrEP use when their relationships changed or ended. 57% percent pilot participants returned for one PrEP refill and 35% returned for a second refill.



Figure 4: PrEP continuation

Men reported various motivations for using PrEP, including fear of HIV, multiple sexual partners, HIV-positive sexual partners, and finding condom use difficult. Some men found that PrEP removed anxiety about getting HIV. A few recalled past instances of feeling at risk and wanted to prevent that feeling in the future.

"What makes me continue uhm...usually... is my behaviour, my behaviour. I like to party and also I drink. Sometimes you find people who have these viruses. So, I got nervous"

Event-driven PrEP could result in greater uptake and use

Flexible use options, particularly event-driven PrEP, could significantly improve uptake and continuation, given that the main challenge cited by men was daily pill taking.

27% of men returning for a PrEP refill returned more than 30 days after their scheduled return date, indicating that they intended to continue using PrEP but were not using it daily. Some men expressed specific interest in event-driven PrEP.

"Maybe be taken once in a week or something or maybe twice in a week. A daily thing is a struggle."

"Is there maybe a two-day pill that can be available?"

*"Can they improve it to maybe use it like once? Like you take that pill once, not an every day thing...
Taking it every day, it is like you are HIV positive, like you are taking the pill every day."*

Conclusions

Early results of this study show low awareness of PrEP among heterosexual men but high interest once aware. Roughly three-quarters reported multiple sexual partners and inconsistent or no condom use, against a high background prevalence of HIV, making them good candidates for PrEP. Uptake and continuation rates were above average, even with minimal follow-up support. Targeting high-risk heterosexual men with PrEP could have both individual and population-level benefits.