

BACKGROUND

Since 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) has proposed HIV self-testing (HIV-ST) as a complementary strategy to increase access to testing and early treatment.

HIV-ST was authorized in Brazil in 2015 and made available in the Unified Health System (SUS) from 2018, with an emphasis on key populations, considering different contexts of vulnerability. However, there is no national strategic plan that include its distribution to young people.

In the country, there is an increase in the infection rates among men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women (TGW), particularly among the youngest. Between 2009 and 2019, the growth of this infection among men aged 15-19 years increased by 64.9%, from 1.1 to 6.1 infected people per 100,000 inhabitants. The estimated prevalence of HIV reaches 18.4% among MSM and among TW is higher than 25% in several locations.

Although the HIV-ST is presented as especially interesting for young key populations in contexts of multiple social inequalities and vulnerabilities, there are few studies that analyze HIV-ST among young people in the world and to our knowledge this is the first study analysing its acceptability among young MSM and TGW in Brazil.

In this qualitative study (PrEP 15 19), we analyzed the acceptability of HIV-ST among young MSM and TGW in three Brazilian capitals.



METHODS

- Data was collected as part of the Formative Research of PrEP15-19, a demonstrative study that aims to evaluate the effectiveness of HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) among young MSM and TGW at increased risk of HIV infection.
- Study sites: Belo Horizonte, São Paulo and Salvador.
- Between August 2018 and January 2019, 74 young people (25 TGW and 49 MSM) participated in the study. Six focus groups and 37 interviews were carried out, with an average duration of 63 minutes.
- Data analysis was based on the Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA).¹

Table 1 - Dimensions of acceptability according to Theoretical Framework of Acceptability (TFA), adapted to this research.

Dimensões - TFA	
Affective attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How would young MSM and TGW feel about taking the HIV-ST?
Intervention coherence and Perceived effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do young MSM and TGW understand their HIV-ST goals and coherence? Is HIV-ST suitable for achieving your goals?
Self-efficacy and Burden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do young MSM and TGW trust their own ability to apply HIV-ST? What efforts in their view are needed to carry out HIV-ST?
Ethicality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does HIV-ST fit into the young MSM and TGW value system?

RESULTS

The participants

- 58 participants
- Most were either (38%) or had completed (47%) in high school
- 55% self-identified as black (brown and black) and 38% as white;
- 53% identified as cisgender men and 35% as transgender women.
- 52% defined their sexual orientation as gay, 17% bisexual, 12% pansexual and 12% heterosexual (all TGW).

Dimensions of HIV-ST acceptability, from the perspective of adolescents

Affective attitude

- Satisfaction with agility and confidentiality;
- Gaining autonomy to monitor one's own health.

Perceived effectiveness and coherence of the intervention

- Suitable for the purpose of early HIV diagnosis and treatment;
- Questioned as a preventive strategy.
- Perceived as more compatible with stable partnerships ;
- Test using blood considered "more reliable" than oral fluid;
- Timely when dispensed at young MSM and TGW friendly venues, like PrEP15-19 clinics.

Self-efficacy and Burden

- Trust in the ability to perform HIV-ST, with privacy gains;
- Some identify fear of finger puncture;
- In case of a positive result, participants doubted their ability to receive the result alone, without-professional counseling;
- "Shame" or "fear of stigma" in HIV-ST dispensing sites not friendly to young MSM and TGW.

Ethicality

- Prevention and self-care were identified as group values, although young MSM and TGW recognize structural and cultural difficulties for these values to be put into practice.
- HIV-ST is perceived as a method that would contribute to self-care.
- Spontaneity in sexual intercourse appeared as a value that could conflict with testing as a preventive strategy, insofar as HIV-ST would introduce a rational element of planning, alien to the sexual culture of young people.

DISCUSSION

Our results show a good prospective acceptability to HIV-ST, similar to that already identified among adults MSM and TGW in Brazil and in other countries.

HIV-ST was reinforced as a useful technology for dealing with sexual experiences being the "dissipation of uncertainty" after a situation of HIV infection risk.

Shame and fear of facing stigmatizing attitudes in health services are mentioned as factors that may affect the good acceptability of HIV-ST. This indicates the potential use of this technology as a stigma management tool, also observed among sex workers in Brazil. This is data that needs to be critically analyzed, noting that the availability of HIV-ST cannot be detached from actions aimed at fighting stigma.

The appreciation of HIV-ST dispensing sites was also guided by cultural competence, a fundamental aspect for the expansion HIV-ST among LGBTQIA+ adolescents, valued in several studies.

There were controversies among participants regarding the ability to deal with a possible positive test result. Some young MSM and TGW questioned the ability of unsupervised application of HIV-ST, similar to what was found by a systematic review and meta-analysis of 25 studies.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS:

This study strengthens the perspectives of young people from low-and middle-income countries on the HIV prevention bibliography. The good acceptability of HIV-ST reinforces the relevance of its dispensation in the Brazilian public health system, as long as it is accompanied by measures aimed at overcoming programmatic vulnerabilities. It is necessary to strengthen public policies aimed at fighting stigma, in a way that is sensitive to the contexts of social inequalities and vulnerability processes experienced by young MSM and TGW.

References:

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- Zucchi EM, Couto MT, Castellanos M, Dumont-Pena E, Ferraz D, Félix Pinheiro T, et al. (2021) Acceptability of daily pre-exposure prophylaxis among adolescent men who have sex with men, travestis and transgender women in Brazil: A qualitative study. PLoS ONE 16(5): e0249293. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0249293>