

Informal PrEP: Attitudes and behaviors of PrEP users outside standard healthcare in the Netherlands

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Context

Prior to the implementation of subsidized PrEP in 2019 in public health centers in the Netherlands, MSM obtained PrEP via informal channels (for example in clinics or pharmacies abroad) or on prescription of the general practitioner (GP). Concerns were raised about misinformation and incorrect use of PrEP, because informal PrEP users can vary in their level of medical supervision.

Studies

- A cross-sectional study (N=426) was conducted to analyze PrEP interest prior to PrEP approval in the Netherlands. Data were drawn from the 2016 Flash PrEP in Europe study.
- A qualitative study (N=30) was conducted in 2018 to explore access to PrEP and PrEP-related healthcare.
- A longitudinal study (N=349) was conducted to analyze predictors of PrEP uptake. In addition, the impact of PrEP on quality of sex life and HIV-related stigma was investigated with the same dataset. Participants were recruited via the website PrEPnu.nl in the period 2017-2019.

Publications

- PrEP interest among men who have sex with men in the Netherlands: Covariates and differences across samples. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(6), 2155–2164. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-019-01620-x>
- Socio-sexual experiences and access to healthcare among informal PrEP users in the Netherlands. *AIDS and Behavior*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-020-03085-9>
- Slow uptake of PrEP: Behavioral predictors and the influence of price on PrEP uptake among MSM with a high interest in PrEP. Preprint: <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/tecwj>
- Quality of sex life and perceived sexual pleasure of informal PrEP users in the Netherlands. Preprint: <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/kmhf3>
- Bridging the serodivide: Attitudes of PrEP users towards sex partners living with HIV. Preprint: <https://doi.org/10.31219/osf.io/qt2uc>

Objective

This poster gives an overview of the 4-year project “PrEP among MSM in the Netherlands: attitudes, intentions, modes of acquisition and sexual risk taking”. The aim of this project was to investigate experiences of (informal) PrEP users regarding PrEP use and accessing PrEP-related healthcare. Furthermore, we investigated attitudes and sexual behaviors of informal PrEP users.

Main findings

- Informal PrEP users are self-reliant and manage to find their way to PrEP-related healthcare.
- For informal PrEP users, the transition to formal PrEP use proceeded fairly fluently as soon as formal PrEP services were implemented at the public health centers.
- Informal PrEP users sometimes had to educate their general practitioner (GP), as GPs often did not have correct PrEP knowledge. Some GPs were not willing to prescribe PrEP.
- MSM reporting high-risk behavior had more interest in PrEP, but high-risk behaviors were not related to PrEP uptake. Instead, PrEP uptake was predicted by the price of PrEP, the person’s financial situation, and previously having had PEP treatment.
- Cheaper generic PrEP makes PrEP more accessible for more MSM, but there are MSM for whom the price remains a barrier for PrEP uptake.
- Like formal PrEP use, the benefits of informal PrEP use extend beyond HIV prevention per se: PrEP also has a positive impact on the quality of sex life by reducing fear for HIV.
- PrEP may help to overcome the serodivide, as PrEP users feel more comfortable and have less anxiety when having sex with men living with HIV.
- The transition of informal to formal PrEP use in the Netherlands can serve as an example for other countries, as in most European countries PrEP access, is not formalized according to a 2019 ECDC report.
- Informal PrEP use may continue to occur, and PrEP healthcare services should be accessible to informal PrEP users.