

ATTITUDES TOWARDS HIV TESTING AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE IN FIVE SOUTH AFRICAN PROVINCES

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INTRODUCTION

HIV testing is a key component in reaching the UNAIDS 90-90-90 targets towards ending the epidemic, yet the current low rates of HIV diagnosis and treatment initiation among young people in South Africa continues to present a challenge. Various barriers impede young people's willingness and ability to get tested for HIV; with key barriers including fear, stigma, perceived lack of confidentiality, and embarrassment.

METHODS

The HERStory study used quantitative and qualitative research methods to evaluate the impact of a combination HIV prevention intervention for adolescent girls and young women in South Africa. As part of the intervention evaluation we explored HIV testing attitudes, risk perception and testing behaviours amongst young men and women. The quantitative survey included 4,399 AGYW aged 15-24. Qualitative methods included 63 interviews and 24 focus group discussions with AGYW, and 6 focus groups with young men.

FINDINGS

Of the 4,399 AGYW surveyed quantitatively, 78.8% (N=3,431) had ever tested for HIV. Amongst those who had never tested, 21.2% (N=968), reasons included: 28.7% did not think they had HIV, 15.3% did not think they were at risk for HIV, 22.3% had not yet "got around to" testing, 8.5% did not know where to go to get tested, 7.6% expressed fears about a positive diagnosis, and 6.4% said they were not ready to test. The main barriers towards HIV testing described qualitatively by AGYW and their male peers included fear of a positive diagnosis and the implications of such, fear of the test itself, the belief that the knowledge of a positive status will make you sick, barriers accessing healthcare services including testing, and social contexts of stigma. Some AGYW said an HIV+ diagnosis would lead to depression, and possible suicidal tendencies. A minority of AGYW stated that they were not scared of an HIV positive status, due to the knowledge that treatment is available, and HIV is a manageable disease.

FEAR OF HIV+ TEST RESULT TEST

I am afraid because if I discover that I have HIV... I can end up taking a decision of killing myself... I won't test for HIV because I am afraid, and if they can say I have it I can simply kill myself. (KZN, IR, 15-18)

FEAR OF TEST

I am afraid to test. I don't even know where to start... (KZN, IR, 15-18)

We are too young to be always talking about testing, we (girlfriend and I) trust each other, therefore we trust that we are both clean. (EC, Male Peers)

TOO YOUNG TO TEST

I prefer to test when am about to die. (EC, NIR, 19-24)

We boys are shy (to test), because we don't wanna know that we dirty or not so we rather keep it a secret so that we might not know what, maybe we gonna get depressed because we have this virus, we gonna die, so we gonna get worried if we know our status. (EC, Male Peer)

Some of us are afraid to do an HIV test because you always think about what if, I have it?... if you are HIV positive... people will see through you that you are HIV positive... That's why we are reluctant to do tests (MPU, IR, 19-24)

DEPRESSION, STRESS, SUICIDAL THOUGHTS IF TEST HIV+

I won't test because I don't want to know if I am HIV positive because that will give me stress. (EC, Male Peer)

SOCIAL STIGMA

Going for a test is difficult... a very difficult thing... you will be stressed and when you are stressed it's easy for sicknesses to attack your body... you will be embarrassed, when you are supposed to go and get your stuff (treatment)... after the results, when you discover that you are sick, you think about what other people will say and about what will happen in your life... what's going to happen to my life... you have those thoughts... That's why I say it is difficult to go and do a test. (KZN, Male Peer)

KNOWLEDGE OF HIV+ STATUS WILL MAKE YOU SICK

I won't go (to test) without seeing the symptoms on me... on my body... my reason for saying that, you will go to the clinic and test and you will discover that you are HIV positive, you will be given treatment, you will start seeing that you are sick, but before you knew your status, you were fine you were not sick, so it starts with us after you have gone to test. (EC, Male Peer)

I have never tested... I am scared ...if I test and find out that am HIV positive, I think I will kill my self... I will definitely kill my self cause then I will have depression. (EC, NIR, 19-24)

HIV IS MANAGEABLE WITH TREATMENT

My mom has a friend that is HIV positive but when you see her you cannot tell, she is healthy. So that encourages me that even if I can get it I will be fine. At first I will be shocked but I will never stress about it, so it does not stress me that much (WC, NIR, 15-18)

There is nothing wrong when you are HIV positive, cause if you find it early you can be given treatment... you will fine like any other person and don't look like you HIV positive (EC, NIR, 19-24)

I am not scared of it (HIV)... but going to test... because of the queue... (EC, NIR, 19-24)
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CONCLUSION

In order to achieve a reduction in HIV transmission, and increase access to treatment for HIV positive young people in South Africa, HIV testing is crucial. However significant barriers to testing remain a reality. Therefore, understanding young people's perceptions towards HIV testing, its social context, and the nuanced barriers towards testing, is critical.

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