

“What do people know and think about medications to prevent HIV and STIs?”

Findings from the POPS study: [Prevalence and factors associated with use of prophylaxis for HIV and sexually transmitted infections among sexual health service attendees in England: findings from a cross-sectional observational study](#)

What was the study about?

This research looked at how many people in England are aware of and use medications to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). It focused on people visiting sexual health clinics in London and the East of England, which included gay and bisexual men as well as heterosexual men and women.

Why is this important?

Prevention of HIV and STIs is essential to help achieve zero new HIV infections and reduce the continued increase in STI diagnoses in England. This research helps us to understand existing awareness of medications to prevent HIV and STIs so we can improve prevention strategies and guide public health policy and action.

What did we do?

Between April 2022 and December 2023, over 1,700 people filled out an online survey. The survey included questions about awareness and use of:

- HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) – a medicine taken to prevent HIV.
- STI post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) – antibiotics taken after sex to prevent bacterial STIs like syphilis and chlamydia.

We used the survey answers to understand who is more likely to know about and use these medications.

Key findings

- **Awareness of HIV PrEP** was high among gay and bisexual men (98%) but much lower among heterosexual men (39%) and women (49%).
- **Use of HIV PrEP** was reported by:
 - 71% of gay and bisexual men
 - 6% of heterosexual men
 - 4% of women
- **Awareness of antibiotics to prevent STIs** was highest among gay and bisexual men (34%) but lower among heterosexual men (15%) and women (18%).
- **Use of antibiotics to prevent STIs** was reported by:

- 11% of gay and bisexual men
 - 5% of heterosexual men
 - 4% of women
 - Most people who used STI prevention antibiotics took the antibiotic called doxycycline.
 - 80% of all participants said they'd be likely to use STI prevention antibiotics if it was available in sexual health services and offered to them.
 - Among gay and bisexual men, those at greater risk of getting an STI (e.g., multiple sex partners or a recent STI) were also more likely to report using STI prevention antibiotics.
 - People using HIV PrEP were also more likely to be using STI prevention antibiotics.
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What do these findings mean?

The study shows that while gay and bisexual men are more likely to already be using HIV PrEP and STI prevention antibiotics, some heterosexual men and women are also interested or already using them. This means that future HIV and STI prevention strategies should include everyone who could be at risk of — not just gay and bisexual men.
