

Sexual health of people living with HIV/AIDS in Switzerland

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Objectives

The present study was to provide a basis to improve the sexual health of people living with HIV or AIDS (PLWHA) in Switzerland. We focused on the following questions: 1) How do PLWHA experience their sexuality?

2) Do they change their sexual behavior after diagnosis of HIV? 3) How sexually active are PLWHA and do they use condoms consistently in sexual intercourse with HIV positive or HIV negative partners or partners with unknown HIV status?

Methods

The study design was observational and cross-sectional. For data collection, we used an anonymous, standardized, self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed in close collaboration with the Eurosupport Study Group V which is investigating the issue in thirteen Countries in the European Union. Sampling was based on the seven HIV outpatient clinics associated with the Swiss HIV Cohort Study (SHCS) [1].

During the 6-month period of data collection, physicians asked 1'995 consecutive patients enrolled in the SHCS to participate. 1'345 patients accepted the questionnaire, 734 patients filled in and returned the questionnaire (Response rate = 54.6%).

We analyzed the data using descriptive statistics stratified by gender and sexual orientation.

Results

•Among the 734 respondents were 23% women, 23% heterosexual men and 54% men having sex with men (MSM). Mean age was 45 years, ranging from 19 to 78.

•About 84% of the respondents were under anti retroviral therapy. In more than three-fourths of the respondents, viral load was undetectable. The mean time since HIV diagnosis was 11 years within a range from less than a month to 27 years. MSM had been living a shorter time with their HIV infection than heterosexual men and women (F=8.26, p<0.001).

•Twenty-three percent of the respondents had physical impairments due to their HIV infection. These were more often people with a longer lasting HIV infection and a detectable viral load (Chi-Square=21.43, p<0.001).

•Nevertheless, the HIV infected respondents were quite satisfied with their health in general. On an 11-point-scale from 0 (for lowest) to 10 (for highest value), the mean value of their rating of their current state of health was 7.5 (SD = 2.21). Heterosexual men and women were less satisfied with their general state of health than MSM (F=5.33, p<0.01).

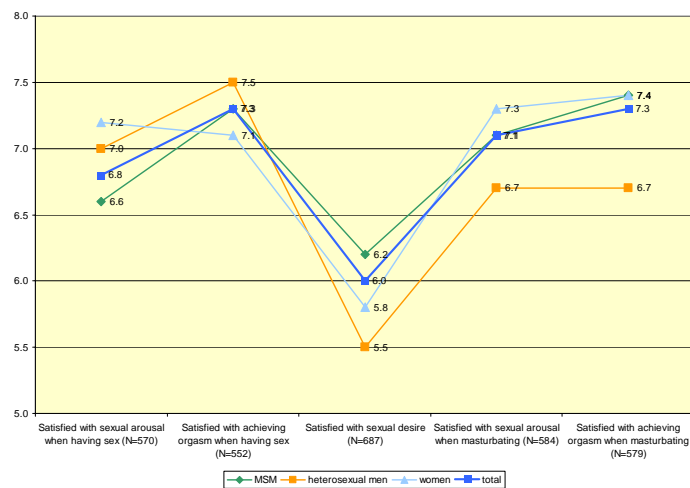


Figure 1: Mean of Satisfaction with sexuality among the different subsamples (0-10)

•Twenty-seven percent of the respondents were dissatisfied with their sexuality. About 26% experienced pain while having sex during the past six months, in women more than 44% (Chi-Square=50.21, p<0.001). Heterosexual men were less satisfied with their sexual desire and with achieving orgasm when masturbating. Further, heterosexual men more often had changed their sexual behavior since HIV diagnosis than MSM and women (Chi-Square=8.19, p<0.05, Figure 2).

•Increasing condom use was the most frequently reported behavior change, followed by avoidance of risky practices and sticking to one partner. Eighteen percent of the respondents told they hadn't had sex at all since the HIV diagnosis (Figure 2).

•About 72% of the respondents were sexually active during the preceding six months. Heterosexual men and women mostly had sex with steady partners whereas MSM reported sex with both steady and casual partners. The mean number of sexual intercourse with steady partners during the past six months was 35 (SD=39.55, R=0-306); with casual partners 20 (SD=28.47, R=0-195).

Condoms were used more consistently having sex with casual partners than with steady partners (88% vs. 76%) and more frequently with HIV discordant than with HIV positive steady and casual partners (84% vs. 62%) (F=11.79, p<0.001, Figure 3). About 65% used always a condom during sex with their steady partners, 72% with casual partners. The protection behavior was independent of gender and sexual orientation.

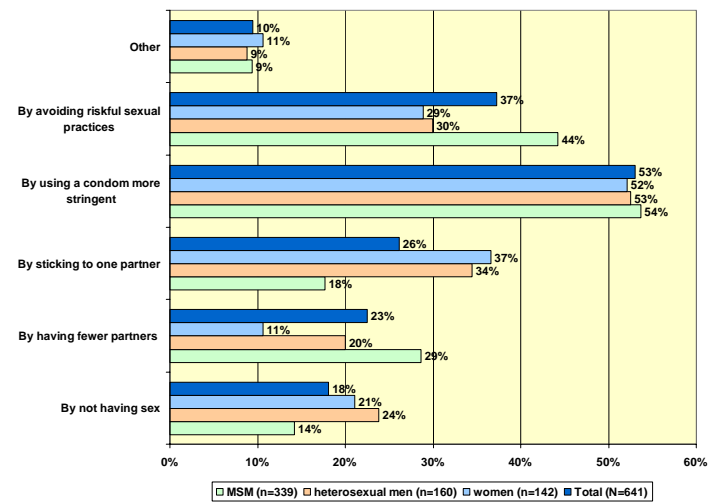


Figure 2: Changes in sexual behavior since HIV diagnosis

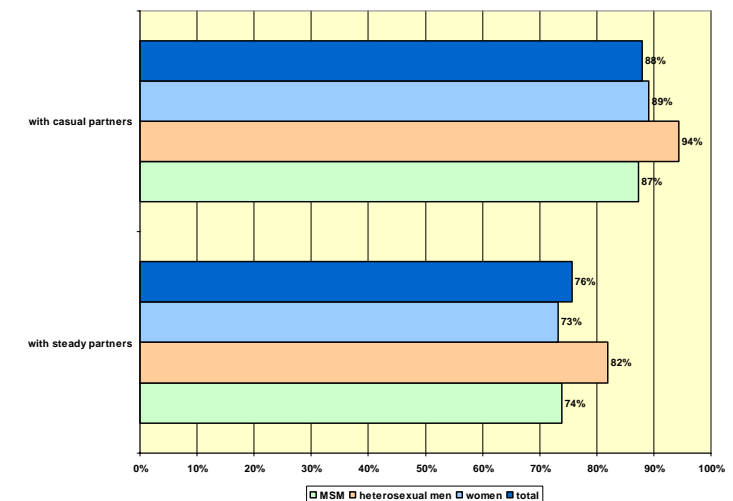


Figure 3: Mean condom use in % by partner status

Conclusion

PLWHA are sexually active, but sexual activity differs in women, heterosexual men and MSM. PLWHA change their sexual behavior after HIV diagnosis. The most common change consists of using the condom more consistently. However, PLWHA report not always using a condom in 28% of the occasions having sex with a casual partner and in 27% of the sexual intercourses with HIV negative partners in the past 6 months. A considerable proportion of PLWHA also experience sexual problems.

To improve sexual health of PLWHA, more support and adaptation of existing services are needed. Thereby, gender and sexual orientation specific aspects have to be taken into account.

To improve condom use with casual partners and HIV negative partners prevention programs have to be tailored for the specific situation of PLWHA. Health care providers (physicians, nurses and social workers) have to continue to devote energy to discussions with PLWHA on risks.

References

[1] Rickenbach M, Keiser O, Taffé P, Francioli P, VIH Esdc. L'étude suisse de cohorte VIH. Médecine et Hygiène. 2003;61:719-23.

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