



From Risk to Resilience: Experiences of Gay and Men Having Sex with Men Using Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) in Baguio and Benguet Province

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Abstract

The development of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) represents a major advancement in HIV prevention, particularly among Gay and Bisexual Men Having Sex with Men (gbMSM). Despite growing access, the lived experiences of gbMSM PrEP users in local Philippine contexts remain underexplored. This qualitative descriptive study examined the personal, social, and behavioral experiences of gbMSM using PrEP in Baguio City and Benguet Province—areas with rising HIV incidence and significant LGBTQIA+ populations. Ten gbMSM PrEP users were recruited through referral sampling and interviewed using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Participants were residents for at least six months and active PrEP users. Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Three major themes emerged: (1) Transforming Actions for Wellness, reflecting improved sexual practices and health awareness; (2) Turn of Events, describing transitions from fear and stigma to acceptance and empowerment; and (3) Harmony Within, highlighting enhanced psychological well-being and self-identity. Participants' PrEP uptake was influenced by perceived HIV risk, health literacy, social support, and access to LGBTQIA+-affirming services such as Balay Marvi and Baguio General Hospital. Persistent challenges included stigma, fear of judgment, and limited provider availability. The study recommends strengthening PrEP education, expanding affirming healthcare training, enforcing anti-discrimination policies, and promoting combined HIV prevention strategies. These findings inform context-specific interventions and support inclusive, holistic care for gbMSM.

Introduction

In the past, it sexual topics have been avoided, and their discussions have always been considered taboo. As societal attitudes toward sexuality expand, leading to a changing sexual landscape, there is a notable improvement in gender equality and greater diversity in sexual behavior. This

behavior encompasses a wide range of actions, expressions, and interactions related to human sexuality. Consequently, there has been a widespread introduction of sex education and the promotion of safer sex practices (Pound et al., 2017). As it strives to adapt to the changing norms of the generation, the Philippines has



started to develop sex education programs for the youth in the country. In 2018, the Department of Education published the Policy Guidelines for the Implementation of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), also known as DepEd Order No. 31, series 2018. This policy centers its approach on addressing the needs of Filipino youth for health and protection against early pregnancy, sexual violence, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), while also reinforcing safe sexual practices such as condom use (Siytangco, 2019). Despite this, data from the 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System reported that there are still students who engage in sexual risk behaviors, such as not using condoms during sexual intercourse, in which high proportions of these individuals are part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender population. These risky sexual behaviors are greatly associated with unfavorable sexual outcomes such as unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, including HIV (Garg & Volerman, 2020). Notably, the popularity of hookup culture, widespread within the younger community (Watson et al., 2017), has influenced these behaviors (Garcia et al., 2012). A significant aspect of modern sexual relations, particularly for the LGBTQIA community, is casual sexual encounters that are frequently made easy by dating apps (Sawyer et al., 2018). When preventative measures like condoms are not regularly used, this behavior may enhance the risk-taking involved in sexual activity.

All over the world, the World Health Organization confirmed that an estimated 39 million people are currently living with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). In the Philippines, there has been a total of 117,946 reported individuals with HIV and 6,919 reported deaths from January 1984 to June 2023 by the Department of Health (DOH, 2023). This June alone, there were 1,518 confirmed HIV-positive individuals reported to the HIV/AIDS & ART Registry of the Philippines (HARP), which represents a 4% increase compared to the same reporting period last year (DOH, 2023). In the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), there has been a rise in HIV cases as well. Between January and June 2023, 73 new cases were reported, bringing the overall count of confirmed HIV cases in CAR to 1008 from 1984 to June 2023 (DOH, 2023). As of August 2023, according to the Department of Health-Cordillera Administrative Region, there have

been 44 confirmed HIV cases in Baguio and 17 cases in Benguet. In these cases, three incidents of mortality are reported in Baguio. In addition, according to the National AIDS and STI Prevention Control Program in CAR, as of June 2023, 62 out of the 77 municipalities/cities in CAR have documented cases of HIV, with Baguio City registering the highest number of cases.

Comprehensive approaches to address the HIV epidemic involve both treatment for those living with HIV and preventive measures to reduce new infections. Through Republic Act No. 8504, known as the Philippine AIDS Prevention and Control Act of 1998, the government focuses on disseminating information and education in various domains to increase awareness, correct misconceptions, and advocate preventive measures. The Department of Health employs multiple strategies, including free voluntary HIV counseling and testing services, the 100% Condom Use Program, peer education, and outreach initiatives.

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) has emerged as a crucial tool in HIV prevention. PrEP was endorsed by the World Health Organization in 2015 upon demonstrating its clinical efficacy. The PrEP was introduced in the Philippines through Project PrePPY in 2017 and was later scaled up by LoveYourself in 2019. It was highly supported by the Department of Health, the American Foundation for Aids Research (AmFAR), and the WHO. Balay Marvi in Baguio City is a vital center for providing PrEP in collaboration with Baguio General Hospital. They have dispensed around 1000 PrEP bottles since their launch in October 2022. Their active enrollees accounted for 486 PrEP users for Northern Luzon and 364 for Baguio and Benguet, as reported by Balay Marvi by LoveYourself as of December 2023. The process of acquiring the initial PrEP bottle involves assessments, counseling, and HIV testing to ensure that PrEP is given to those who meet the criteria and understand the prescribed regimen. Candidates undergo HIV testing, and if the result is non-reactive, then PrEP is offered as a preventive measure. The pre-counseling stage involves a nurse conducting a thorough assessment of the candidate's health needs. An initial supply of PrEP is provided, and subsequent visits include laboratory tests. It is offered free for men who have sex with men and transgender women. The frequency of visits depends on individual adherence, and PrEP can be taken daily or in



an event-driven manner for different levels of protection against HIV.

The Republic Act No. 8504, or the Philippine AIDS Prevention and Control Act of 1998, mandates the provision of appropriate information concerning prophylaxis. Health services are required to disseminate literature detailing the proper use of prophylactic devices or agents and their efficacy against HIV and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In Baguio City, HIV hubs play a vital role in disseminating accurate information regarding PrEP. The Health Services Office, while it does not directly dispense PrEP bottles, through its HIV/AIDS awareness office, offers comprehensive information regarding PrEP, including its availability and usage within the city.

Individuals categorized as being at greater risk are the focus of enhanced preventive measures to combat HIV transmission, specifically Men having Sex with Men (MSM) and transgender individuals as primary recipients of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis. The study by Chan et al. (2023), which they conducted in different high-income and low-income countries in Asia and Australia on PrEP product awareness, preferences, and past experiences among transgender women and men who have sex with men, findings revealed that there has been an increased awareness towards the use of PrEP in these populations. Adapting to the needs and preferences of different individuals and communities, the differentiated approaches applied may make PrEP services more acceptable, accessible, and support PrEP uptake.

Quantitative studies on the awareness and acceptance of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) among Men having Sex with Men (MSM) individuals in the Philippines have been carried out recently by Restar et al. (2022) and Restar et al. (2020). This research has contributed significantly to our understanding of this relatively recent development. However, there is still a clear gap in the literature, as there has yet to be a thorough exploration of the experiences of Gay and Bisexual Men having Sex with Men (gbMSM), regarding their use of PrEP in our local context, employing a qualitative research approach.

A journal published by the Oregon Health Authority (2019) concluded, based on their findings, that additional information is needed about PrEP knowledge, attitudes, and experiences

of individuals who could utilize PrEP as a preventive measure. These include groups such as women, youth, LGBTQIA+, people who inject drugs, and people who are living in rural areas. Comparing the experiences of these populations with diverse backgrounds would unveil their views of related phenomena. Another study by Jackson-Gibson et al. (2021) discusses the importance of understanding the progress in PrEP uptake and its impact on risk reduction, particularly among vulnerable populations.

Heredia and Goldklank (2021) highlighted in their study the possibility of focusing on the experiences of Gay populations, who are vulnerable groups burdened by high HIV rates, for future PrEP research. Fostering education about the diverse experiences that could benefit from PrEP use might allow healthcare professionals to recommend PrEP for people who do not conform to the typical PrEP user profile, including those who are not sexually active at 16 and are not categorized within the high-risk populations. A comprehensive understanding of the experiences of individuals who have conformed to PrEP might help health workers suggest PrEP to patients they think will benefit from it, helping them anticipate challenges and advantages that are more relevant to their situation.

Despite supportive efficacy trials, so far, there is limited evidence regarding the contextual factors on an individual's understanding and use of PrEP, and little research explores how it has been incorporated into participants' existing HIV risk-reduction strategies (Harrington, 2020). These studies collectively support the statement that there is limited evidence regarding the contextual factors of an individual's understanding and experiences using PrEP, as well as its incorporation into existing HIV risk-reduction strategies.

This study aims to explore the experiences of Gay and Bisexual Men having Sex with Men (gbMSM) individuals in Baguio and Benguet Province, covering areas such as risk, perceptions of self and others, and relationships, with the intention to unveil the social influences in their decision-making processes, acceptance of PrEP, and changes in their behaviors. Understanding these experiences can provide insights into the challenges and dynamics associated with PrEP uptake within diverse social environments to



optimize its implementation and effectiveness in HIV prevention efforts.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study revolves around its potential to (1) improve HIV prevention, (2) reduce healthcare disparities, (3) promote medical competence, and (4) expand PrEP access to Gay and Bisexual Men Having Sex with Men (gbMSM), and other communities. The study is significant in the following areas:

In terms of nursing practice, the study has the potential to shed light on disparities in healthcare access and utilization among Gay and Bisexual Men Having Sex with Men (gbMSM), especially in the context of HIV prevention. If barriers to PrEP access are recognized, the study may help identify and address inequalities within healthcare systems. Furthermore, the study may provide healthcare professionals, especially nurses, with an additional perspective in their advocacy for all patients, disregarding gender or sexual orientation, fostering diversity and inclusion within the profession. The study catalyzes advancing diversity and inclusion in nursing education. It provides future healthcare professionals with added knowledge and tools needed to provide more effective and culturally appropriate care to Gay and Bisexual Men having Sex with Men (gbMSM) individuals. The study's findings could be incorporated into the curriculum for nursing schools, ensuring that the next generation of nurses is well-prepared to meet the patient population's diverse healthcare needs. The study can provide essential data that can be integrated into the creation of targeted and effective public health strategies. Through understanding this psychographics, the study can contribute to evidence-based policymaking by providing recommendations based on the gathered data for improving PrEP-related policies. Policymakers can also create a safer and more supportive environment for HIV prevention by recognizing and acknowledging the experiences of Gay and Bisexual Men having Sex with Men (gbMSM) individuals, which can contribute to better health outcomes.

In the field of nursing research, the study may provide insights into evidence-based policy making, which may influence targeted public health strategies. The study is also useful in the nursing administration by informing the

administrators about the inequalities that gay and bisexual people face in healthcare settings. The study can be useful in creating a more inclusive healthcare system that caters to the needs of the gay and bisexual community.

For the communities of Baguio City and Benguet Province, this study amplifies the voices of gbMSM individuals, increasing public awareness and understanding of their healthcare experiences and needs. It empowers at-risk groups by fostering greater awareness and potential uptake of PrEP as a preventive measure against HIV. Moreover, for local and national government bodies, the study provides data-driven insights that can inform public health strategies and policy formulation. Recommendations derived from the findings can guide the development of targeted interventions and the creation of a more supportive healthcare environment for sexual minorities, ultimately contributing to improved health outcomes and reduced HIV transmission rates.

Methodology

The study used a qualitative descriptive methodology. Descriptive research provides precise and systematic descriptions of a population, situation, or phenomenon. (McCombes, 2022). This allows participants to articulate their thoughts and emotions in their language, facilitating a comprehensive examination of various individual experiences.

The study was conducted in Baguio City and Benguet Province due to the high number of reported HIV cases reported by the DOH Cordillera. As of August 2023, the cases were predominantly from Baguio City and several towns in Benguet, with most attributed to Men-Having-Sex-With-Men (MSM). The study participants were ten PrEP users who were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: PrEP user, residing within Baguio or Benguet Province for at least six months, and had self-identified as a member of the Gay and Bisexual Men community. The six-month residency criterion is based on Presidential Decree No. 431, which defines the minimum requirement for local residency in the Philippines.



Participants were selected through referral sampling, recommended due to the sensitive nature of the topic, which makes participant identification challenging. Referral sampling involves finding individuals who meet the inclusion criteria, securing their cooperation, and asking them to recruit additional participants under the same conditions (Heckathorn, 2016).

Researchers conducted face-to-face interviews; this method enabled in-depth exploration of responses, treating the questionnaire as a meaningful discussion to assess validity (Marshall, 2016). Semi-structured questions guided the interviews, and with participants' consent, audio recordings were made to ensure accuracy. Beginning initially with the main question, "What are your experiences in using Pre-exposure Prophylaxis?", guide questions were also asked, which included the following: (a) How long have you been taking PrEP?, (b) How was PrEP introduced to you? / How did you know about PrEP?, (c) What were your initial thoughts after knowing about PrEP?, (d) What motivated you to start using PrEP?, (e) Can you describe the process you went through to access PrEP?, (f) How frequent do you take your PrEP?, (g) Have you experienced any side effects while using PrEP?, (h) How has PrEP impacted your relationships, both romantic and otherwise?, (i) How has PrEP impacted your sexual health decisions?, (j) In what way has PrEP influenced your overall well-being and peace of mind?, (k) Have you encountered any challenges or barriers while using PrEP?, (l) How do you navigate stigma or judgment from others regarding your use of PrEP? (If mentioned stigma or judgment), (m) Have there been any changes in your sexual behavior since starting PrEP?, (n) How do you communicate with sexual partners about your use of PrEP?, (o) What are some misconceptions you've encountered about PrEP?, (p) What advice would you give to someone considering starting PrEP? Anonymity was maintained using code names, and recorded data was stored securely on a password-protected device and deleted after use.

After obtaining the University ethics committee approval, researchers sent permission letters to government offices and organizations in Baguio and Benguet. Eligible participants (Table 1) were purposively selected based on predefined inclusion criteria, primarily through referrals from key informants and outreach via social media platforms

commonly used by the gbMSM (Gay and Bisexual Men who have Sex with Men) community.

Before data collection, a comprehensive informed consent process was conducted with each participant. This process included a clear explanation of the study's objectives, procedures, duration, and the voluntary nature of participation. Participants were explicitly informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. The consent form also outlined the potential risks and benefits associated with participation. Potential risks included emotional discomfort when discussing sensitive topics such as sexual behavior or HIV-related stigma. To mitigate these risks, participants were assured of their right to skip any questions they found distressing and were provided with referrals to local psychosocial support services, if needed.

On the other hand, the potential benefits of participating included contributing to research that may inform health policy improvements and increase awareness of Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) services among gbMSM communities. Participants also gained an opportunity to share their lived experiences in a safe and confidential setting, potentially leading to empowerment and increased knowledge about HIV prevention.

All participants provided written informed consent before participation. Interviews were scheduled at the participants' convenience, ensuring privacy, comfort, and confidentiality. To further protect participant identity, all data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used in the presentation of findings. Data collection was discontinued when, through the course of interviewing, the same themes were coming out, and there were no new themes, ideas, opinions, or patterns. This indicates that there is enough data to conclude, and further data collection and analysis are unnecessary.

The researchers employed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a qualitative method developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), to analyze the participants' narratives. RTA is a flexible, iterative process that emphasizes the active role of the researcher in identifying and constructing themes from the data. The process began with familiarization, where interview transcripts were read multiple times to gain a deep understanding



Table 1*Demographic Profile*

Code Names	Age	Sexual Orientation	Residence	Sexual Relationship	Sexual Practice	Duration of PrEP Use
Paolo	23	Gay	La Trinidad	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	More than a year
Vice	21	Gay	Baguio City	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	7 months
Jake	35	Bisexual	Baguio City	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	7 months
Boy	22	Gay	Baguio City	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	More than a year
Bretman	20	Gay	La Trinidad	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	2 months
Mimi	29	Bisexual	Itogon	Exclusive and monogamous	On PrEP and consistent condom user	2 months
Rajo	46	Bisexual	La Trinidad	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	More than 5 years
Raymond	21	Gay	Baguio City	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	6 months
Gandanghari	24	Bisexual	Baguio City	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	1 year
Ogie	29	Gay	Mankayan	Casual with multiple partners	On PrEP and consistent condom user	2 years

of the content. Initial codes were then generated inductively by identifying significant features related to the research questions. These codes were grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure internal coherence and relevance to the data set. Each theme was clearly defined and named, capturing key patterns in the participants' experiences with PrEP use. The researchers developed a narrative report that compellingly portrayed the experiences of GBT adults utilizing PrEP, integrating direct participant quotes to support and enrich the findings. Reflexivity was maintained throughout the process

by acknowledging the potential influence of the researchers' perspectives, collaborating closely with peers, and seeking feedback from qualified researchers to ensure the credibility and rigor of the analysis.



Results and Discussion

Confronting Reality: Transforming Actions for Wellness

For years, HIV has been associated with risky sexual behaviors. In a journal published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), unprotected anal sex is a sexual practice commonly associated with Men Having Sex with Men (MSM), posing the greatest risk for HIV infection and placing MSM at risk for other sexually transmitted infections. Beyond these actions are the other personal experiences of each individual—HIV-related concerns, anxiety, and interactions with those people living with HIV. These experiences etch a more profound awareness into their minds, leading to a realization of their susceptibility. Along with this, HIV, a severe and life-altering condition that would have serious repercussions, contributes to one's decision to initiate the use of preventive methods such as PrEP. In this new generation, people are embracing self-care and proactive health measures, determined to be responsible for their actions.

Rebalancing Safety and Risk

As this awareness grows, so does the decision to act. Those who acknowledge their risk are more likely to initiate preventive measures like PrEP. Knowledge about how to use PrEP as prescribed, and the bounds of its effectiveness even when used properly, accurately, or inaccurately, is likely to influence behavior (Grov et al., 2021). This heightened sense of vulnerability becomes fuel, driving individuals to seek out ways to protect themselves. They are no longer passive participants in their health journey; they are proactive, taking bold steps to reduce their risk. This collective awakening transforms fear into action, a living proof of the power of awareness.

"My first reason is that, in the community, there are many people who are at risk talaga for HIV, so yun, I want to avoid exposure as much as possible. (My first reason is that in the community, there are many people who are at risk for HIV, so I want to avoid exposure as much as possible)." said Raymond.

Gandanghari, who has multiple sexual partners, emphasized the importance of prevention in his decision to take PrEP.

"I just wanted to be better, be safe than sorry kasi prevention is better than cure nga diba? So, yun yung kinonsider ko when taking PrEP." (I just wanted to be better, to be safe than sorry, because prevention is better than cure, right? So, that's what is considered when taking PrEP)." said Gandanghari.

When asked about their reasons for using PrEP, Boy explained that his motivations went beyond personal safety and included the well-being of others as well. He emphasized that using PrEP not only protected himself but also contributed to the safety of his sexual partners and the broader community.

"It's just for my own safety rin and yon din yong safety ng iba kong mame-meet there or may engage in any sexual or in any form of fun, to be honest (It's just for my own safety and the safety of the other people I will meet out there or may engage in any sexual or in any form of fun to be honest)." said Boy.

Given the high prevalence of HIV in the community, their choice to start PrEP shows a deep sense of caring and responsibility. It represents a shared spirit of prevention and support and shows a dedication to preserving not only their health but also the health of their community.

Encounters in a Serodiscordant Relationship

Mimi, who was in a relationship with someone living with HIV, harbored concerns about his own HIV status due to their past sexual encounters. Despite learning late about his partner's HIV-positive status, Mimi feared he might have contracted the virus as well, accepting the possibility given their intimate history. Upon undergoing HIV testing, Mimi received the relieving news that he tested negative.

"Magpapatest ako kasi matagal na din naman na hindi kami nag sex kaya yon nagpatest ta para sure lang pero iniisip ko na i-accept kung anong resulta kasi ginawa din naman. Ginawa ko din naman yun. Ayun, negative naman siya." (I want to get tested because it's been a while since we didn't have sex, so I got tested just to be sure, but I was prepared to accept whatever the result was because I also did that, and it turned out he was negative)." shared Mimi.



Recognizing his heightened vulnerability to HIV transmission while caring for his ailing partner, Mimi opted to initiate PrEP as a preventive measure.

"Inuwi na siya pero payat pa din siya so kaya kailangan ng mag- assist kaya ako nag assist sa kanya hanggang sa bumalik (He was brought home, but he was still thin, so he needed someone to assist, so I took care of him until he returned.)"

"Nag take ako ng PrEP noon kasi kalapit ko lang din siya tapos syempre baka hindi natin maiwasan." (I was also taking PrEP back then because I was just nearby, and of course, to avoid any incidents.)" Mimi said.

Mimi's proactive approach to HIV testing, given his potential exposure, reflects a commendable commitment to health responsibility. He took the effort to ensure safety by starting PrEP, acknowledging his vulnerability to HIV while providing care and being there for his partner. By doing this, he showed that he was managing his health effectively and taking preventative measures to protect his partner.

A Turn of Events

As taking the first PrEP pill signifies acceptance of the seriousness of HIV and one's vulnerability to it, continuing, regular PrEP use that is integrated into one's daily life demonstrates a genuine proactive approach to one's health. PrEP's ability to reduce HIV transmission is largely contingent on its users' dedication. PrEP adherence is influenced by both external and internal factors. Personal motivation, perceived risk, and health beliefs are examples of internal factors; social support, stigma, and health care services are examples of external factors. All of which have the potential to support or undermine a person's proactive health measures.

Navigating Accessibility

PrEP users' interactions with HIV clinics or hubs leave a lasting impression. The way they are treated has a significant effect on whether they decide to stay in the care or, in the case of PrEP distribution, whether they will continue to get support for their use of PrEP. These interactions are important because they have the potential

to influence their follow-up and commitment to using PrEP.

Rajo, who was once obtaining PrEP at a specific facility, expressed deep dissatisfaction with how he was treated after confiding in the nurse that he had been having unprotected sex.

"They treated me like a kid, the nurse there almost to the point of scolding me for having unprotected sex. So yeah, and I don't appreciate that." said Rajo.

This experience prompted him to transition to a new clinic for his PrEP needs. He expressed heartfelt gratitude toward his current provider, acknowledging the crucial role they played in his journey. He emphasized that without their support, he would have gone to great lengths to obtain PrEP, even considering returning to Manila just to avoid potential discrimination.

"Thankfully I heard about Balay Marvi. If there wasn't Balay Marvi, I would've gone back to Manila. I would spend that money and spend that time to get PrEP without judgment." Rajo said.

While it is commonly known that using condoms in addition to PrEP is recommended to prevent other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), healthcare professionals can sensitively and successfully educate patients on this subject. This therapeutic approach ensures that individuals not only understand the importance of comprehensive protection strategies but also feel supported and empowered to adopt safer sexual practices. Another respondent, Ogie, shared their experience of exploring various hubs and clinics in Baguio specializing in HIV care. They highlighted the significant impact of the environment on people's willingness to utilize these services.

"Based on our experience before, medyo konti ang nagpapatest kasi siguro baka intimidated sila sa environment ng hospital. (Based on our experience before, few people were getting tested probably because they might feel intimidated in a hospital environment.)" shared Ogie.

"Nung nakita naming mas approachable yong mga nasa Northern Sanctuary for example and FPOP, ayon mas pinipili namin. It is more on the environment. (When we found places like Northern Sanctuary and FPOP to be more approachable, we preferred them. It is more on the environment)."



Despite these experiences, all respondents are currently availing themselves of PrEP at the same HIV hub, which they described as an environment that fosters confidentiality, sensitivity, and kindness. Such a supportive healthcare setting encourages individuals to engage with and maintain their regimen, highlighting the importance of compassionate care in promoting adherence to PrEP.

Side Effects Experienced by PrEP Users

PrEP (Pre-exposure Prophylaxis) has emerged as an empowering prevention method. Yet, it bears the burden of side effects – a challenge for the users, leading to whether they'll make or break it.

These usually occur during the "start-up" period when you first start taking the medication and are often quite tolerable. Participants reported headaches, nausea, chills, fever, drowsiness, dizziness, rash, and feeling of bloatedness, which subsided after some time of taking PrEP. Insomnia, fever, itchiness, and drowsiness were the most common side effects, and 2 out of 10 participants reported each. In comparison, the other side effects were only experienced by 1 out of 10 participants.

Some of the participants reported experiencing four common side effects of PrEP: insomnia, fever, itchiness, and somnolence.

"Noong una lang naman na nagkaroon ng parang side effects yung gamot. Parang insomnia talaga yung pinaka sa akin tapos nahihirapan matulog yun lang insomnia lang mostly yung tumama talaga sakin nang sobra na parang hanggang alas sais hindi ako makatulog. (At first, I experienced the side effects of the medicine. The common side effect I experienced was insomnia. It was mostly insomnia. I had a really hard time sleeping and just stayed awake until six in the morning.)" Bretman shared.

"Actually, the first month is pag-take ko antukin ako. (Actually, in the first month, when I took it, it made me drowsy.)" shared Vice.

Raymond and Ogie reported experiencing chills and mild fever as side effects, while Ogie reported experiencing itchiness.

"I think yong mga naging side effects ko lang na na indicate and nasabi sakin is yung chi ls and mild

fever symptoms pero that only happened in my first 2 weeks of taking it. (The only side effects that I experienced and was told to me are chills and mild fever symptoms, but that only happened in my first 2 weeks of taking it.)" said Raymond.

Ogie said *"May konting pangangati pero like mga kwan lang yon 1 or 2 days. (There was some itching, but it lasted for only 1 to 2 days.)"*

Interestingly, despite the diverse range of side effects reported by other participants, three individuals shared that they did not experience any side effects during their use of PrEP. This suggests that while some may experience side effects, others may not, emphasizing the need for personalized assessment and monitoring.

"Ever since naman I did not experience anything as far as now, okay naman siya wala akong naexperience na anything na sinabi nila na possible side effects. (Ever since I didn't experience anything as far as now it's okay, I didn't experience anything that they said were possible side effects.)" shared Paulo.

Body responses to medications vary significantly for each individual, and side effects vary significantly among participants. While some participants dealt with common symptoms like insomnia, fever, itchiness, and drowsiness, others experienced less common symptoms such as decreased libido and a feeling of bloatedness. Interestingly, three participants reported no side effects at all, highlighting the diverse spectrum of tolerance to medications.

Ultimately, the ability to adjust and adapt to these side effects has become a critical factor in their decision whether to continue or stop using PrEP. Navigating and adapting to these challenges shows their resilience and determination to prioritize their health.

The Stigma Encountered by PrEP Users

The effectiveness of encouraging and sustaining PrEP may be hindered by stigmas and shaming associated with it. The stigma and shaming surrounding its users often come from a misconception that they are engaging in sexually risky behaviors that increase HIV cases, despite PrEP being an effective preventive measure. Because of the stigma and shame associated with



PrEP, potential users may decide not to use it at all because of the label and judgment (Dubov et al., 2018). For those who are already taking the medication, this can deter them and cause them to stop.

Vice, who does not engage in any transactional sex, verbalized that the word that stuck with him, which was told by his acquaintance upon learning about his PrEP use, was the word “pokpok”, a Tagalog slang that means prostitute. He felt deeply hurt and stigmatized by this label that made him question the perceptions and biases people hold about PrEP users. He said, “*Parang yong pinaka word na tumatak sa akin is “pokpok” so parang ang sakit din eh na sabihan ka ng ganun.* (It’s like the word “pokpok” really stuck with me, so it hurts when someone says that to you.)”

According to two of our respondents, there is a common misconception that taking PrEP correlates with having multiple sexual partners every day. This erroneous belief often leads to unwarranted judgments and social stigma.

Paulo shared “*Yung mga ibang tao talaga yung tingin nila sa mga PrEP users mga ano eh yung talagang very active na parang everyday siguro na nag-aano everyday silang nakikipagsex.* (Other people really think of PrEP users, what are they the really, It’s like they’re very active. It’s like they’re doing something every day like every day they have sex.)”

“*You admit that yes you are taking PrEP and they will automatically assume that you are somewhat very active na everyday you have a sexual partner, different people, different places, ganun ganyan.* (You admit that yes you are taking PrEP, they will automatically assume that you are somewhat very active, that you have a sexual partner everyday, different people, different places, like that.)” Boy said.

Their continuous intake of PrEP shows resilience in the face of these stigmas and accusations. Their resolve to put their health first despite criticism and false information shows a remarkable strength. To dispel these negative preconceptions and empower people to make decisions about their health without fear of criticism, it emphasizes the necessity for medical professionals and public health campaigns to educate the public about PrEP, its goals, and its

users.

Harmony Within

Beyond its biomedical function of preventing HIV transmission, PrEP was described as a source of psychological comfort, allowing individuals to navigate their sexual and relational lives with reduced fear and anxiety. Participants expressed that knowing they were protected enabled them to feel more in control of their health and well-being, which fostered a greater sense of self-confidence and personal security. This inner harmony is often translated into healthier relationships, improved mental health, and greater openness in communicating with partners. In contexts where uncertainty and stigma often surround sexual health, PrEP emerged not just as a preventive tool but as a means of reclaiming autonomy, reducing internalized fear, and fostering emotional resilience. In times of uncertainty, PrEP gives a sense of safety, security, and confidence beyond protection.

Choices and Changes

The introduction of PrEP as a new preventive measure for HIV offered a newfound sense of assurance, greatly reducing HIV-related concerns and anxiety among the participants. Its influence varied from person to person, leading to diverse changes in sexual behaviors. Likewise, one study reported that participants experienced increased sexual “confidence” (Lea et al., 2017), and another found that PrEP use facilitated more “adventurous” sexual experiences (Prestage et al., 2019).

For Ogie, his use of PrEP became a factor in his condom use, claiming that he had used condoms less when he started PrEP.

“*Definitely less paggamit ko ngayon, unless of course kung hindi sure yong kasama or di kaya preferred nila with condom ganun.* (Definitely less condom uses now unless, of course, if the partner isn’t sure or if they prefer using a condom.) he shared.

Two out of ten participants reported having an increased number of casual partners while on PrEP, as it gave them a sense of confidence to engage in sexual activities. Ogie expressed how PrEP brought a surge of security and significantly



lessened his anxiety, allowing him to engage more freely.

"Dumami charr, ayy hindi naman kasi the same lang din although yeah medjo mas dumami kasi nga mas brave na hindi ako natatakot ganun, pero at the same time, panatag din ako kapag PrEP user din sana yong partner so at the same time mas naging mapili din. (It increased, just kidding. No, it's the same, although there were slightly more encounters because I'm not as afraid, but at the same time, I feel more secure if my partner is also a PrEP user, so I've become more selective.)" Ogie said.

Others experienced a more cautious shift, like Jake, who integrated PrEP with additional methods such as condoms to further strengthen his protection. This highlights the individualized nature of PrEP's influence on sexual health practices.

"Wala naman siyang pinagbago I guess just like the usual parin na ano..even though nag PePrEP kasi ako I always use condoms parin as well kasi. PrEP can do so much. (Nothing really changed I guess just like the usual because even though I take PrEP I always still use condoms because ahh PrEP can do so much.)" Jake shared.

With PrEP as their ally, they undertake their sexual activities with a sense of freedom. Gone are the days of hesitance— PrEP has become an instrument they can rely on for their sexual health. PrEP is not merely a prevention method; it is a symbol of autonomy, a power of choice. With each pill swallowed, they affirm their commitment to self-care, prioritizing their well-being and the freedom to live on their terms. These mixed results show that the relationship between PrEP use and risk behavior is complex and that PrEP use does not always lead to an increase in condomless anal sex. According to Rojas-Castro et al. (2019), even if studies were to identify changes in behavior, such as increases or decreases in condomless anal sex, those behaviors are unlikely to override the demonstrated high levels of effectiveness of PrEP.

Tranquility in Prevention

The participants have their own stories that involve unique personal experiences and perspectives. They have undergone a series of diverse events in this transformation of

self-assurance and self-empowerment. PrEP, with its profound impact, has become more than just a preventative measure— it is an act of self-responsibility. According to a study by Hayes et al. (2023), the psychological effects of PrEP encompass a variety of outcomes, such as adopting more protective sexual health behaviors and alleviating HIV-related anxiety. This decrease in anxiety was linked to a sense of empowerment and autonomy in making decisions about one's sexual health. Raymond and Gandanghari similarly expressed their experience with PrEP. For them, it is a powerful prevention method that brings peace of mind and a sense of safety.

"Ayon mostly sa mga decisions ko to do those kinds of things yung peace of mind talaga na improve kasi ang hirap magkaroon ng ano ng parang akala mo na expose ka ganun, mawawala din lahat ng mga akala mo kasi you know yong statistics naman ng PrEP is 99.8% from what I know na mai-imunize ka so, yon malaki yong contributions niya na parang may peace of mind ka talaga pag ginawa mo yon or on most of your interactions. (Most of my decisions are geared towards improving peace of mind because it's really difficult to have that feeling of being exposed. All those assumptions you have tend to disappear because, you know, the statistics for PrEP show a 99.8% immunity rate. That contributes a lot to having real peace of mind when you do that or in most of your interactions.)" Raymond said.

"You learn to be calm about it..." said Gandanghari.

PrEP-induced reduction of fear and anxiety enabled users to become more sexually liberated and had a profoundly positive impact on sexual enjoyment (Devarajan et al., 2020). Boy discovered that his sexual experiences had been shaded with a deeper sense of intimacy, finding not only safety but also emotional and sexual liberation.

"Before taking PrEP, I was afraid to lose stuff, sexual activities. Actually, certain activities doon sa romantic activities. After taking PrEP, my sexual activities become more romantic? It became erotic. Cause you are free to do whatever you want, since you're knowing that you're protected from you know HIV. (Before taking PrEP, I was afraid of losing certain sexual activities. Actually, certain activities in romantic endeavors. After taking PrEP, my sexual activities, became more romantic? It became erotic. Because



you are free to do whatever you want, knowing that you're protected from, you know, HIV.)" Boy shared.

PrEP lights the path toward a future where fear is transformed into a sense of confidence, safety, security, and peace of mind. Each one is a testament to the transformative power of taking control, of choosing to live a life defined not by limitations.

Proven Power of PrEP

After all, PrEP stands as a critical intervention in the battle against HIV transmission. While clinical trials have firmly established its efficacy (McCormack et al., 2016), it's equally important to hear testimonies from its users regarding its effectiveness in preventing HIV. These narratives not only serve as a validation of PrEP's efficacy as a preventive measure within these specific communities but also serve as powerful testimonials that can reach individuals who may be considering PrEP but are unsure of its effectiveness. Paolo, when asked about his experience with PrEP after one year of use, considering he has multiple partners, mentioned that he is not disappointed with it, as each time he undergoes HIV testing, the results come back negative.

"I've been using it for almost one year or more than one year. My experience as a PrEP user, okay naman; it hasn't disappointed me. Nagpapatest naman ako palagi tas it's been negative naman so I'm happy about it. (I've been using it for almost a year or more. My experience as a PrEP user has been okay; it hasn't disappointed me. I always get tested, and the results have always been negative, so I'm happy about it.)" Paulo said.

Clinical data and user testimonials support the continued significance of PrEP as an essential tool in the fight against HIV transmission. Like Paolo, the other participants also consistently turned out to be HIV-negative during their duration of use, demonstrating the effectiveness of PrEP among the ten participants. Every participant in our study currently receives PrEP, and to ensure a continuous supply for the participants, they are required to get regular HIV tests, which reliably show that they are HIV-negative.

Conclusions

The stories shared by participants shed light on their diverse experiences with PrEP, encompassing motivations for usage, effects during and after PrEP use, the ongoing stigma attached to PrEP, and the challenges they faced as PrEP users. Among Gay and Bisexual Men Having Sex with Men (gbMSM) individuals, casual sexual relationships are becoming the norm, which motivated their initiation of PrEP due to their perceived susceptibility to HIV. Participants acknowledged that the quality of care they received influenced their decision to continue using PrEP; adherence challenges like side effects and stigma surrounding HIV and PrEP, compounded by discrimination, limited education, and distrust in healthcare systems, became a hindrance to their use. Most participants continued using condoms alongside PrEP, while some felt assured enough to reduce condom use and felt a sense of deeper intimacy and decreased anxiety, leading to increased casual partners and sexual activities. Despite the evident benefits of PrEP, the study revealed various barriers impeding its widespread acceptance and utilization. The stigma surrounding HIV and PrEP emerged as a significant hindrance, compounded by discrimination, limited education, and distrust in healthcare systems.

Recommendations

Promoting safe sexual practices through national awareness campaigns on PrEP, HIV, and sexual health is vital. Policies should support PrEP education for at-risk groups, especially youth, via partnerships between the Local Government unit with non-government organizations and academic institutions. Researchers advocate training healthcare providers in patient-centered, evidence-based care, fostering supportive communities, and anti-stigma campaigns. Additionally, hospitals with dedicated HIV testing facilities and PrEP distribution centers should ensure that staff members working in these areas do not overlap, to prevent any potential bias or inappropriate behavior towards individuals seeking PrEP. This separation helps maintain a supportive and non-judgmental



environment, fostering trust and encouraging individuals to seek out and use PrEP as part of their HIV prevention strategy. Policymakers should enforce anti-discrimination laws to enhance care quality and PrEP uptake. Comprehensive sexual health counseling during PrEP consultations, including condom use, is essential for addressing individual needs and behaviors.

The study's scope was primarily confined to exploring the experiences of Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (GBT) individuals within Baguio-Benguet. This focus aligns with the prioritization of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) among populations at high risk of HIV transmission, notably GBT individuals. However, acknowledging the limitations of this study, there was no exploration of transgender individuals. The absence of exploration into the experiences of transgender individuals underscores the need for further research involving a broader participant pool. Expanding the study's scope to include a more diverse range of individuals would provide a richer and more comprehensive understanding of PrEP experiences. By incorporating diverse perspectives from individuals of various genders, sexual orientations, ages, socioeconomic backgrounds, and cultural identities, researchers can gain valuable insights into how different individuals perceive and navigate PrEP usage. It would foster a more inclusive dialogue surrounding HIV prevention and sexual health, ensuring that the needs and experiences of all individuals are adequately addressed.

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