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What do patients consulting in a free STI center know about HIV transmission and prevention?

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Background. Despite therapeutic progress, HIV remains a public health issue with about 6400 new HIV contaminations each year in France. HIV prevention relies on health education, early screening, treatment as prevention, post and pre-exposure prophylaxis. Patients' visits to free sexually transmitted infections (STIs) screening centers (CeGIDD) are opportunities to spread prevention messages. This study aimed to assess level of HIV knowledge in a Parisian CeGIDD to improve prevention messages.

Methods. The study included patients older than 18 who came for STIs testing between August 2017 and August 2018 and who understand written French language. Data were collected by a self-administered electronic questionnaire filled in before medical consultation. It included sociodemographic data and knowledge regarding HIV transmission and prevention.

Results. The study included 2002 patients. The median age was 27 years and 66% were men. More than 96% of patients know that HIV transmission is possible through unprotected sexual intercourse and through needle exchange. However, some misconceptions persist: 20% of patients believe that HIV transmission is possible from using public toilets and 22% by mosquito bite. Prevention measures perceived as “absolutely or rather efficient” by patients were: using condom (97%), requesting a screening test from his partners (91%), getting screening tests regularly (90%), choosing his partners correctly (62%), having sex with few different partners (50%). Half of patients heard of post-exposure prophylaxis (51%).

Conclusions. Main modes of HIV transmission are well known (unprotected intercourse and needle exchange). However, false beliefs regarding prevention may lead to risk behavior (doing screening test regularly doesn’t protect against HIV) and need to be explored. Moreover, assessment of variation in level of HIV knowledge according to patient’s profile may help to target prevention message according to specific populations.

Key messages.

- Main modes of HIV transmission are well known.
- False beliefs regarding modes of prevention need to be explored to target HIV prevention messages.