

POLICY BRIEF

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Promoting HIV Self-Testing Among Men

Key messages

- Comprehensive awareness campaigns targeting men, utilising diverse communication channels, should be prioritized to increase knowledge about HIV self-testing among men.
- HIV self-testing kits should be made widely accessible by incorporating them into existing healthcare, and community infrastructure and utilising online platforms to make it convenient for men to access these kits.
- It is critical to address affordability through cost-cutting measures and subsidies to remove financial obstacles and allow more men to benefit from HIV self-testing.

Introduction

Background:

Significant progress has been made in preventing HIV transmission and treating people living with HIV worldwide, although a substantial burden of HIV remains concentrated in hard-to-reach groups such as men and among key populations. Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) continues to have the highest HIV and AIDS burden globally, with more than 67% of all cases (1) located in SSA. According to the UNAIDS, men are less likely to take an HIV test, less likely to access antiretroviral therapy, and more likely to die of AIDS-related illnesses than women (2). In Sub-Saharan Africa, compared to 42% of women, less than 33% of men aged between 15-49 years report ever having tested for HIV and receiving their HIV test

results (2). In South Africa, more than 2.5 million males aged between 15 years and older have been diagnosed with HIV (3). HIV self-testing (HIVST), an HIV testing option with high acceptability among populations, is one of the key tools that have been widely adopted by governments globally to address gaps in HIV testing.

Current Policies and Practice on HIV Self-Testing:

Despite the widespread availability of HIV testing services, there remains a concerning low uptake of HIV testing among men compared to women (4). This underutilization of testing services leads to missed opportunities for early diagnosis, timely treatment, and prevention interventions. Multiple factors continue to deter men from testing for HIV, including stigma, limited access, lack of privacy, unfriendly healthcare environments, and concerns about confidentiality (5). Due to these obstacles, men experience delayed access to healthcare services, resulting in higher rates of morbidity and mortality in men than in women (6, 7) While HIV self-testing has a widespread acceptability among men, this strategy has not been fully embedded in programmes nor promoted effectively. The lack of effective promotion of this strategy in existing programmes could act as a barrier to increasing HIV testing rates among men, limiting its overall effectiveness.

Objective:

This policy brief outlines the key challenges deterring men from accessing HIV testing services, outlines the benefits of HIV self-testing to empower men, and makes recommendations for policymakers, health authorities, and key stakeholders to potentially close the current HIV testing gap, highlight efficient mechanisms that encourage HIV self-testing among men and improve their health outcomes. Several studies have been conducted in sub-Saharan Africa, reporting high acceptability of HIV self-testing among men (8-12).

Key Challenges of HIV Testing for Men

Stigma and Discrimination:

Stigma and discrimination remain some of the most important factors deterring men from testing for HIV. Studies conducted in sub-Saharan Africa continue to report that stigma and discrimination connected with being diagnosed with HIV persists in many communities and has a negative impact on men's engagement with HIV testing services, as it hampers efforts to create supportive and non-judgmental testing environments (5, 13-15). Men fear being seen at the healthcare facility, being judged, and have concerns about lack of privacy and confidentiality of their test results (5, 16). To encourage men's participation in the HIV care continuum in sub-Saharan Africa and address men's needs, it is crucial to promote intervention approaches such as HIV self-testing to mitigate several barriers that men face.

Lack of Awareness:

Limited knowledge and awareness of HIV self-testing options among men contribute to low testing rates. A recent systematic review focused on synthesizing men's perspectives on HIV self-testing in sub-Saharan Africa reported that several men are not aware of this HIV self-testing model, including its availability, benefits, and usage of HIV self-test-

ing kits (17, 18). However, the review also noted that once men became aware of this HIV self-testing and its benefits, they were willing to utilize HIV self-testing after it was introduced to them and to promote its use among their peers (17, 18). Clearly, there is a need for conducting HIV self-testing educational campaigns and outreach initiatives to disseminate knowledge and improve awareness about the availability and benefits of HIV self-testing as an additional HIV testing option.

Accessibility and Affordability:

The lack of accessibility and affordability of HIV self-testing kits pose significant challenges in sub-Saharan Africa. As such, individuals with limited financial resources may be prohibited from accessing and using HIV self-test kits due to high costs. In many SSA settings, HIV self-testing kits are not readily available in local pharmacies, healthcare facilities, or communities, as they remain limited outside of pilot implementation studies, which hinders individual's access to this important HIV testing option (19). Calls have been made to make HIV self-testing free of charge and subsidized by the government, similar to the current conventional HIV testing approaches, to encourage individuals to consider HIV self-testing as a viable HIV testing option (20).

The following section will explore the benefits of HIV self-testing for men and propose policy recommendations to overcome these challenges and promote the use of HIV self-testing as a viable HIV testing option in sub-Saharan Africa.

Benefits of HIV Self-Testing for Men

Privacy and Confidentiality:

HIV self-testing offers a unique and important advantage by providing individuals with an approach that helps them



remove some of the barriers that are associated with accessing clinic-based HIV testing services by enabling them to conduct and interpret their own HIV tests at their own private space and at their own convenient time, which supports them to avoid potential social stigma or judgement associated with traditional clinic settings (10, 17, 21). This strategy helps to empower and to motivate men to take control of their sexual health, thereby increasing the rates at which men are testing for HIV (22). HIV self-testing strategy is indeed a private and confidential model for empowering individuals to know their HIV status.

Timely Diagnosis:

To improve men's health outcomes, curb HIV transmission, and achieve epidemic control, men living with HIV must be diagnosed and linked to HIV treatment early and retained on HIV treatment (23). This will not only improve male health outcomes but will also contribute to declines in new HIV infections among women and girls (23). Considering the fact that HIV self-testing is easy, quick, and private, individuals may be motivated to take a test earlier than they would if they had to visit a healthcare facility, which could result in a timely diagnosis, empowering them to seek necessary medical support at the earliest possible stage (24). HIV self-testing reaches people who would otherwise not test, such as those who perceive themselves to be at low risk of

contracting HIV, whilst research has shown a high number of those who perceive themselves to be at low risk of HIV infection being infected with HIV (25). This is critically imperative given that men living with HIV are more likely to die early compared to women due to delayed HIV diagnosis and HIV treatment (6). Therefore, the use of HIV self-testing strategy promotes timely diagnosis of HIV at an early stage, may contribute to facilitating important preventive measures such as condom use and linkage to HIV treatment to improve health outcomes.

Empowerment and Autonomy:

The HIV self-testing strategy offers men a convenient, accessible, private, and confidential HIV testing option to take control of their health, enabling them to become active participants in the healthcare process. This form of HIV testing model inspires a strong sense of empowerment and autonomy by eliminating many barriers that have been reported to deter men from accessing and utilising HIV testing services from traditional healthcare settings (5).

The following section will provide policy recommendations to encourage HIV self-testing among men, addressing the challenges identified and utilising these benefits to create effective and sustainable interventions. This section will be based on the main challenges and the benefits of HIV self-testing for men, as discussed in the preceding sections.



Policy Recommendations

Awareness Campaigns:

Advocacy for comprehensive awareness campaigns specifically targeting men is crucial in increasing knowledge about HIV self-testing. Various stakeholders, including government departments, civil society organizations, and practitioners, should collaborate to implement these campaigns. Utilising diverse communication channels, such as social media, television, radio, and community outreach programs, tailored messages can be disseminated to address the unique barriers and concerns faced by men. By increasing awareness and dispelling myths surrounding self-testing, men can make informed decisions and feel confident in utilising this testing option.

Distribution and Accessibility:

It is essential to have policies in place that guarantee the widespread availability of self-testing kits in order to encourage the uptake of HIV self-testing among men. This can be achieved by integrating self-testing kits into existing healthcare infrastructure, including pharmacies, community centers, and sexual health clinics. Additionally, leveraging online platforms and e-commerce channels can greatly enhance accessibility, allowing men to conveniently order self-testing kits for home delivery. By ensuring that self-testing kits are readily accessible, we can remove barriers and encourage men to take advantage of this convenient and confidential testing option. Policymakers, healthcare providers, and stakeholders should collaborate to implement these strategies and make self-testing kits easily accessible to all men.

Affordability and Subsidies:

Addressing the affordability of HIV self-testing kits is es-

sential to remove financial barriers for men. Policymakers should consider implementing measures such as subsidies, discounts, or insurance coverage to make self-testing kits more affordable. Collaborations with manufacturers, NGOs, and healthcare providers can explore cost reduction strategies and negotiate pricing to make self-testing kits accessible to individuals with varying financial capacities.

Counselling Support:

While self-testing offers privacy and convenience, it is crucial to ensure that individuals receive appropriate support throughout the testing process. The provision of pre- and post-test counselling services is vital to ensure that men understand the testing procedure, interpret their results accurately, and receive appropriate guidance on subsequent steps if they need support (17). Prioritizing the inclusion of counselling services in self-testing programmes should be a top priority for policymakers, healthcare professionals, and relevant stakeholders.

By implementing these policy recommendations, policymakers, health authorities, and stakeholders can create an enabling environment that supports and promotes HIV self-testing among men.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this policy brief emphasizes the importance of promoting HIV self-testing among men. The many barriers deterring men from accessing and utilising HIV self-testing from traditional healthcare facilities, coupled with stigma, discrimination, and accessibility challenges, underscores the need for innovative approaches. These obstacles may be removed by utilising the benefits from HIV self-testing.



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