

2nd International Conference on HIV/AIDS, STDs, & STIs

October 27-29, 2014 Embassy Suites Las Vegas, USA

Examining HIV risk underestimation in an urban population

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Background: HIV risk perception is recognized as potentially impacting HIV risk behavior, testing patterns and acceptance of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). We seek to describe the HIV risk perceptions of a population undergoing HIV testing in Philadelphia.

Methods: Patients undergoing HIV rapid testing in the city health centers of Philadelphia between July 2007 and December 2013 were administered a brief survey. Data collected included HIV risk behavior(s), patient risk perception, Tester risk estimate and HIV test results. A descriptive analysis using SAS v. 9.3 was performed.

Results: During the study period 33,430 individuals underwent HIV rapid testing and participated in the survey. A modest majority (55%) was female and 19.7% were foreign-born. Overall 83.7% perceived their risk to be zero or low. Of those testing positive (0.7%, n=232), 35.7% of females and 26.4% of males perceived their risk as zero ($p<0.01$), and 35.7% of females and 41.9% of males, as low. Of the 162 who tested positive and perceived their risk as zero or low, the Tester estimated risk was zero for none, low for 41.9%, moderate for 27.2% and high for 30.9%. Patient perceived risk was correlated with previous HIV testing rates, and rates of acceptance of PrEP.

Conclusions: In this urban population, patient risk perception of zero or low was overall commonly found. Furthermore, a substantial minority of those testing positive for HIV perceived their risk as zero. The degree of disagreement between the patient perceived risk and the Tester estimated risk, as well as the proportion of HIV-positive patients thinking their risk was zero, suggest prevalent underestimation of risk by patients. The correlates of HIV risk perception such as testing behavior and acceptance of PrEP mandate further study in this area of inquiry.

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