

SHORT COMMUNICATION

Progress and challenges in the implementation of PrEP in Latin America

Avances y desafíos en la implementación de la PrEP en América Latina

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ABSTRACT

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has become a key tool in HIV prevention in Latin America, although its implementation has been uneven across countries. Brazil led the way in 2017, focusing on high-risk populations such as men who have sex with men and transgender women. Argentina integrated PrEP into its combined prevention strategy through specialised centres and clinical guidelines. Uruguay developed specific guidelines and pilot programmes, while Chile focused on studies and training. Bolivia and Paraguay recently began incorporating PrEP into their public health systems, facing challenges in data collection and access. PrEP use was associated with both a possible increase in risky sexual behaviour and earlier detection of STIs thanks to frequent access to health services. Low coverage and factors such as stigma, lack of knowledge, and infrastructure limitations were common obstacles. Despite this, PrEP proved to be an effective strategy for reducing HIV, underscoring the need for sustainable and inclusive public policies to expand its impact in the region.

Keywords: PrEP; HIV; Prevention; Latin America; Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

RESUMEN

La profilaxis preexposición (PrEP) se consolidó como una herramienta clave en la prevención del VIH en América Latina, aunque su implementación fue desigual entre países. Brasil lideró la adopción en 2017, enfocándose en poblaciones de alto riesgo como hombres que tienen sexo con hombres y mujeres trans. Argentina integró la PrEP en su estrategia de prevención combinada mediante centros especializados y directrices clínicas. Uruguay desarrolló guías específicas y programas piloto, mientras que Chile se centró en estudios y capacitación. Bolivia y Paraguay iniciaron recientemente su incorporación al sistema de salud pública, enfrentando desafíos en la recolección de datos y acceso. El uso de la PrEP se asoció tanto a un posible aumento en conductas sexuales de riesgo como a una mayor detección temprana de ITS gracias al acceso frecuente a servicios de salud. La baja cobertura y factores como el estigma, la falta de conocimiento, y limitaciones en infraestructura, fueron obstáculos comunes. A pesar de ello, la PrEP demostró ser una estrategia eficaz para reducir el VIH, subrayando la necesidad de políticas públicas sostenibles e inclusivas para ampliar su impacto en la región.

Palabras clave: PrEP; VIH; Prevención; América Latina; Infecciones de Transmisión Sexual (ITS).

BACKGROUND

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) has established itself as a key tool in HIV prevention in Latin America.⁽¹⁾ Its

implementation has been uneven in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Bolivia, and Paraguay, and its impact on rates of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is a topic of growing interest.^(2,3,4) Below is a detailed analysis of the status of PrEP in these countries and its relationship with STIs.

PrEP consists of the daily administration of antiretroviral drugs, such as tenofovir and emtricitabine, to HIV-negative people at high risk of acquiring the virus. When taken consistently, PrEP can reduce the risk of HIV infection by more than 90 % in sexual intercourse and by at least 74 % in people who inject drugs.^(5,6,7)

According to UNAIDS data, the number of people who have received PrEP in Latin America increased from less than 2 000 in 2016 to more than 630 000 in 2019. However, coverage remains low compared to the estimated target population.⁽⁸⁾ For example, in Spanish-speaking countries in the region, it is estimated that only between 2 % and 3,5 % of people at risk have access to PrEP.

Argentina has made progress in implementing PrEP as part of its combined prevention strategy.^(9,10) The Ministry of Health has developed clinical guidelines for health teams and established combined prevention centers that offer PrEP, HIV and STI testing, and counseling.^(11,12)

Brazil pioneered the region in incorporating PrEP into its public health system in 2017.⁽¹³⁾ The program is primarily targeted at men who have sex with men (MSM) and transgender women, considered to be the groups most at risk. Brazil has also developed training programs and educational materials for health professionals and the community.^(14,15,16)

Uruguay has developed specific guidelines for implementing PrEP and launched pilot programs for its distribution in public health services. The focus is on key populations and the integration of PrEP into existing health services.⁽¹⁷⁾

Chile has conducted studies to map the characteristics and coverage of available PrEP programs, focusing on people over 18 and, in some cases, adolescents, depending on local policies.^(18,19) There is a clear need for ongoing training for health personnel and potential users to overcome stigma and facilitate access.

Bolivia and Paraguay have begun implementing PrEP in their public health systems.^(20,21) Paraguay, for example, began distributing PrEP to prevent new HIV cases, although it faces challenges related to data availability and fragmentation of information.

The implementation of PrEP has sparked debate about its impact on other STI rates.^(22,23,24) Some studies suggest that PrEP use may be associated with an increase in risky sexual behaviors, such as decreased condom use, which could lead to a rise in STIs.^(25,26,27)

However, other analyses indicate that PrEP may reduce STIs by increasing testing frequency and access to health services, allowing for earlier detection and treatment.⁽²⁸⁾ In addition, PrEP implementation is often accompanied by educational interventions and condom promotion.

Among the main challenges for the expansion of PrEP in the region are:

- Lack of knowledge and stigma surrounding HIV and PrEP.
- Limitations in health infrastructure and staff training.
- Need to integrate PrEP into existing health services and ensure financial sustainability.

PrEP represents an effective strategy for HIV prevention in Latin America. While its implementation has advanced in Brazil and Argentina, significant challenges remain to expand its coverage and ensure its integration into health systems. Addressing these challenges through inclusive public policies, education, and collaboration among diverse actors is crucial to maximizing PrEP's impact in reducing HIV and other STIs in the region.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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