

PrEP for HIV-negative testers in Malawi: Offers and uptake as of May 2024

Background

- ❖ Malawi began providing free pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV at public sector clinics in April 2019, starting with selected districts and eventually expanding nationwide by October 2020. In March 2024, the country also introduced the use of Long-Acting Injectable PrEP at six facilities as part of an implementation science study to allow the country to monitor its effectiveness before expanding to more locations.
- ❖ Little is known about the extent to which eligible clinic attendees are offered PrEP, how many of them accept it, and why or why not. This brief presents May 2024 SENTINEL survey data to fill in this gap.

Methods

- ❖ From 8-31 May 2024, AMBIT conducted the third round of the SENTINEL survey of ART clients at 12 public sector clinics in Chiradzulu and Blantyre Districts in the Southern Region and Lilongwe District in the Central Region of Malawi.
- ❖ At each study site, up to 50 adults (16 years and older) seeking HIV testing at the study sites were enrolled in the study sequentially as they arrived at the clinics during study recruitment periods.
- ❖ After the testing process had been completed, participants who tested HIV-negative were asked about their experiences with testing, information provided about HIV prevention, whether they had been screened for or offered PrEP, and whether they had accepted PrEP if offered.

Results

Table 1. HIV-negative sample characteristics

Characteristic	Men	Women
N	179	376
Median age	29 (23-37)	27 (22-34)
Education		
Primary school or less	148 (83)	344 (91)
High school or more	31 (17)	32 (9)
Employment		
Formal employment	27 (15)	24 (6)
Informal employment	102 (57)	196 (52)
Unemployed	27 (15)	127 (34)
Student or trainee	23 (13)	29 (8)
District		
Blantyre	66 (37)	122 (32)
Chiradzulu	53 (30)	143 (38)
Lilongwe	60 (33)	111 (30)
Facility setting		
Rural	89 (50)	228 (61)
Urban	90 (50)	148 (39)
Number of previous HIV tests		
0	20 (11)	31 (8)
1	38 (21)	80 (21)
2	52 (29)	116 (31)
3+	69 (39)	149(40)
Reason for testing today		
Voluntary testing	100 (56)	164 (44)
Pregnancy/ partner is pregnant	9 (5)	93 (25)
Ill health/ recommended by health provider	54 (30)	91 (24)
Access to PrEP	4 (2)	5 (1)
Other	12 (7)	23 (6)

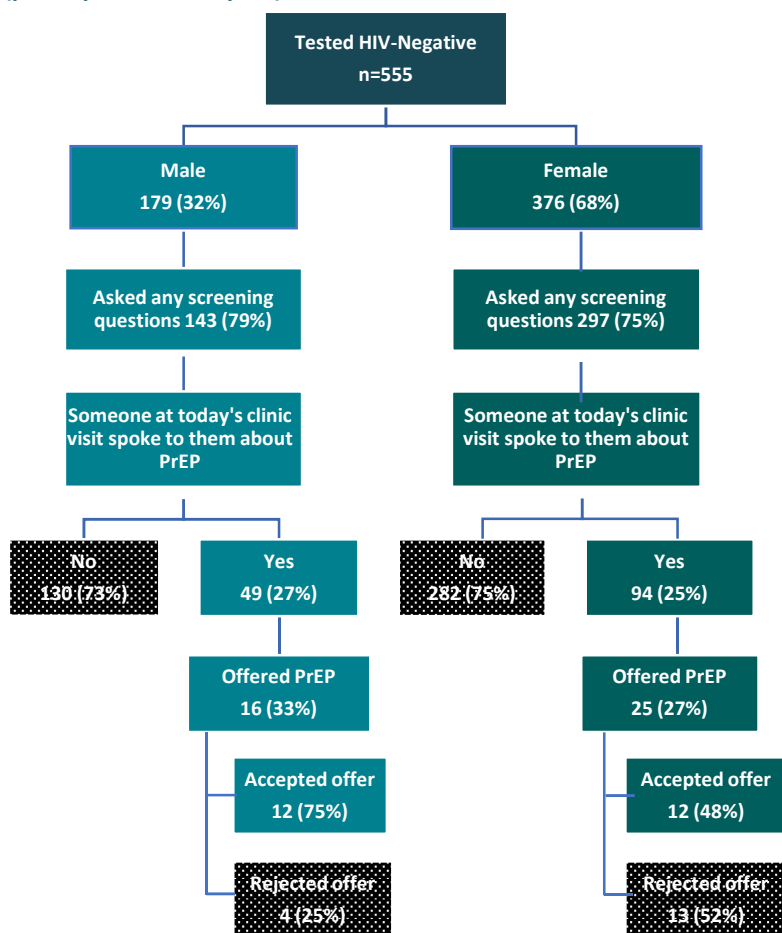
Table 2. Prior PrEP knowledge and experience

Characteristic (n, %)	Men	Women	Total
N	179	376	555
Have you ever heard about a tablet or injection that you can take that prevents HIV (PrEP)? (Yes)	127 (71)	238 (63)	365 (66)
Where did you hear about this medication (PrEP)?			
Nurse	11 (9)	33 (14)	44 (12)
Counsellor	43 (34)	88 (37)	131 (36)
Media	33 (26)	35 (15)	68 (19)
Friend/Family member/ partner	31 (24)	62 (26)	93 (25)
Other (college/school/ youth club/clinic)	9 (7)	20 (8)	29 (8)
Have you ever been offered PrEP in the past?			
No	112 (88)	211 (89)	323 (88)
Yes - tablets	15 (12)	26 (11)	41 (11)
Yes - injection	0 (0)	1 (0)	1 (0)
Have you ever taken PrEP before?			
Yes (n, % of full sample)	9 (5)	12 (3)	21 (4)
Yes (n, % of those offered PrEP)	9 (60)	12 (44)	21 (50)
Median months previously on PrEP	8 (5-24)	13 (1-17)	13 (5-21)
Did you take the medication in accordance with how you were advised? (yes)	6 (100)	10 (83)	19 (90)
Did you have any challenges taking the PrEP that you were prescribed? (Yes)	2 (22)	4 (33)	6 (29)

Table 3. PrEP risk screening experience among those testing negative

Characteristic (n, %)	Men	Women	Total
N	143	297	440
Did the provider ask you about recent sexual encounters and number of sexual partners? (Yes)	112 (63)	191 (51)	303 (55)
Did they ask whether you used protection during those sexual encounters? (Yes)	115 (64)	174 (46)	303 (55)
Did they ask about the HIV status of your partners or whether you know this? (Yes)	112 (63)	270 (72)	382 (69)
Did they ask if you were under the influence of drugs or alcohol during those sexual encounters? (Yes)	58 (32)	68 (19)	126 (23)
Did someone discuss PrEP with you? (Yes)	49 (27)	94 (25)	143 (26)

Figure 1. PrEP offers and uptake on the day of study enrollment (participants' self-report)



- ❖ Enrolled 555 HIV-negative participants (Table 1).
- ❖ About two-thirds of negative testers were previously aware of PrEP as a prevention option, but only a handful (12%) had ever been offered PrEP when previously testing negative for HIV (Table 2). Among those offered PrEP, exactly half had accepted it at the time of the offer.
- ❖ Most testers (79% of men and 75% of women) were asked some questions about HIV transmission risk, but **only about a quarter (26%) said that PrEP was discussed with them** (Table 3, Figure 1).
- ❖ Among those found eligible for PrEP, **a third of men and a quarter of women were offered PrEP**.
- ❖ **Three-quarters of men and half of women who were offered PrEP accepted it** at that time.
- ❖ Reasons offered by testers for not accepting PrEP included perceived risk of HIV exposure; belief that it was not necessary, not sick; risk of perception of infidelity in a stable relationship; and readiness.

Conclusions

- ❖ A majority of negative testers were asked PrEP risk screening questions, indicating healthcare providers are increasingly integrating PrEP discussions into routine screenings, which is a positive step towards improving PrEP accessibility.
- ❖ Despite high awareness and increased risk screening, direct communication between health care providers and patients about PrEP remains limited.
- ❖ Enhancing provider-patient dialogue is crucial for bridging the gap between PrEP awareness and actual uptake.

