

THE EMERGE REPORT

HOW HAS THE PANDEMIC IMPACTED OUR SEXUAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING?



HIV
Ireland



Although we have been living with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic for over two years now, it's important that we look back on the effect it has had on us, so we know how best to develop and deliver services going forward. While health inequalities existed for the LGBT+ community before the pandemic, it's clear that these have been intensified by COVID. This is particularly true when it comes to the sexual health and wellbeing of gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men (gbMSM).

The main aim of the MPOWER Programme at HIV Ireland is to respond to the sexual health and wellbeing needs of gbMSM. As the pandemic has disrupted our lives so profoundly, we need to better understand what our needs are and use every opportunity to address them. So, last summer we created EMERGE, a nationwide survey which asked almost 1,000 gbMSM across Ireland how the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions impacted their sex, health and wellbeing.

In this special community report, we highlight some of the key findings of the EMERGE report. We show how the widespread disruption to sexual health services throughout the country has resulted in significant barriers to accessing testing, treatment and prevention services and point to the likely impact being a rise in undiagnosed and untreated STIs, as well as missed prevention opportunities. The report finishes with recommendations which call for services to be appropriately resourced so that they can reopen fully with enough capacity to respond to a surge in sexual health needs as we move into a new phase of living with COVID-19. Take a look.

Read the full report at
mpower.hivireland.ie/emerge



Who got involved?

942 gbMSM

(Gay, bisexual and men who have sex with men)

70% recruited via Instagram, Facebook and Twitter,

20% from Grindr, Squirt and Growlr.

10% from GCN and partner orgs.

85% identified as gay.

98% were cisgender.

37 was the average age of respondents with the youngest being 18 and the oldest 89.

58% were single.

19% in a monogamous relationship.

8% in a complicated relationship

15% in a non-monogamous relationship.

6% reported having a disability.

61% lived in Dublin.

74% were born in Ireland.

75% were HIV negative.

8% were living with HIV.

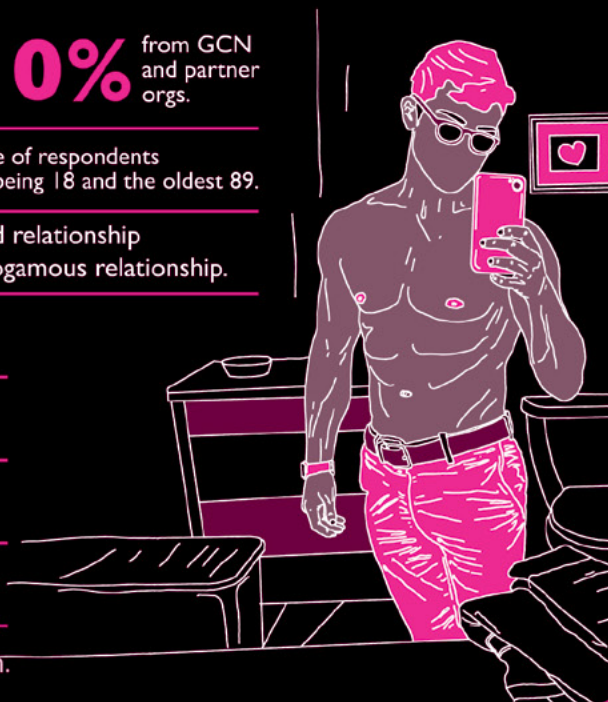
17% never tested for HIV.

91% of people living with HIV were on treatment with an undetectable viral load.

18% of HIV-negative people were using PrEP.

20% had never tested for STIs before.

The survey was available in English, Brazilian Portuguese and Spanish.



Sex during the pandemic

72% had no sex or reduced the amount of sex they were having during the COVID-19 pandemic.

60% of those having sex, met new or casual partners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

91% met casual partners online.

15% met in cruising spots.

11% at sex parties.

79% felt some level of anxiety or concern about acquiring COVID-19 during sex.

42% used different methods to help prevent COVID-19 during sex, including enhanced hygiene, sex without mouth-to-mouth contact, wearing masks during sex, etc.

Oral sex was the most common 91%, followed closely by anal sex 87%.

21% had group sex.

11% reported engaging in chemsex during that period.

Of those engaging in chemsex **53%** had either less or the same amount as in the preceding 12-months as they would have had usually, while **47%** increased the amount of chemsex they had.



Access to sexual health services



gbMSM living with HIV

87% of participants living with HIV were able to access HIV care throughout the pandemic.

13% reported care disruption - most commonly to bloodwork, followed by mental health support.

3 people reported disruption to HIV treatment.

44% accessed STI screening and treatment services with no difficulty.

21% had some difficulty but were able to access.

10% were unable to access services.

24% did not attempt services.



HIV negative and untested gbMSM

20% of HIV-negative and untested men had attempted but were unable to access services.

- **41%** did not attempt to access
- **27%** had difficulty but got access
- **13%** had no problem getting access

Of people who experienced difficulty or were unable to access services

- **82%** were attempting to get an STI test.
- **73%** were attempting to get an HIV test.
- **51%** were attempting to access PrEP.



PrEP

- **51%** of gbMSM using PrEP before the pandemic continued using it
- **24%** stopped and restarted
- **11%** changed the way they were taking PrEP
- **8%** stopped and are planning on restarting
- **7%** stopped completely.



PEP

- 7%** of HIV negative/untested men felt they needed PEP during the pandemic
- **36%** were able to access it
 - **32%** were unable to get to a clinic or A&E
 - **20%** didn't access it because of the A&E charge
 - **18%** wanted to avoid hospitals during the pandemic



STI

- **14%** experienced symptoms of an STI during the COVID-19 crisis.
- **12%** had an STI treated by a clinician.
- **7%** reported self-medicating for an STI they thought they had.

The **EMERGE** Report Recommendations



Testing and Access to Services.

1. Restore and improve sexual health services across Ireland and resource the expansion of their capacity to respond to a surge in testing and treatment needs.
2. Expand low threshold testing initiatives and invest in additional innovative HIV and STI testing strategies.
3. Provide additional capacity to provide equitable access to PrEP services across Ireland.



Well-being and Mental Health.

4. Prioritise responses for those experiencing increased health inequalities.
5. Invest in community spaces, social activities and create resources that support well-being.





Alcohol and Drug Use.

6. Equip existing alcohol and drug support services and invest in targeted peer-led initiatives.



Read the full report at
mpower.hivireland.ie/emerge

 @MPOWERprogramme  @mpowerprogramme