

ATN 158: LifeSteps PrEP for Youth Summary of Study Results

Full Title

Feasibility, Acceptability, and Preliminary Efficacy of LifeSteps for PrEP for Youth Pilot Study (ATN 158)

Study Description

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis for HIV, or “PrEP” involves taking a medication by mouth or receiving injections to prevent HIV. PrEP has been shown to significantly lower HIV risk, but young men who have sex with men (YMSM) sometimes have difficulty taking the medication which can make it less effective. Life-Steps for PrEP is a nurse-led, multi-session program designed to help individuals take PrEP as prescribed to ensure it works as effectively as possible. LifeSteps for PrEP was originally designed for adults. LifeSteps for PrEP for Youth (LSPY) was a study designed to adapt the LifeSteps intervention for youth; the goal was to build young men’s skills to achieve their own sexual health care goals, including PrEP use.

YMSM between the ages of 16 –24 years old (y.o.) from Atlanta, Boston, and Chicago were chosen at random (e.g., like a coin flip) to receive either LifeSteps adapted for YMSM, or standard of care (SOC) counseling and followed for 6 months. PrEP adherence, or the degree to which YMSM took PrEP as prescribed, was measured by self-report in an online survey and lab blood tests that measured the amount of PrEP in the participant’s blood. We then compared the results between the two groups by using the blood tests and surveys.

Study Results

Between November 2019 and September 2021, 32 YMSM were enrolled; 29 completed 6-month follow-up. Most participants (69%) were 22-24 yo.; 16% were 16-18 y.o.; 56% were White, 9% Black, and 6% Latino. Half identified as gay and none as heterosexual; others reported non-heterosexual identities, including identifying as queer and gender fluid. Almost half (47%) used marijuana in the past 3 months, 22% used inhalants, 9% cocaine and 9% amphetamines. Only 9% had previously used PrEP and only 3% had used PEP in the prior year.

At 6 months, 69% of participants reported still using PrEP; among those who reported ongoing use of PrEP, 70% of those individuals took it well enough to remain protected against HIV. At the 6 month visit, 60% of those randomized to the SOC and 64% of those receiving LifeSteps reported at least one condomless anal sex act in the prior month. At 6 months, 18% in the control group and 27% who received LifeSteps reported 100% usage. For participants who provided blood samples, drug levels were similar between the LifeSteps and the SOC group. The most common reasons cited for non-adherence were losing pills or not having pills with them (9%), side effects (9%), and running out of medication (3%). By 6 months, 5 of the SOC and 4 of the LifeSteps participants had stopped taking PrEP.

From in-depth interviews with participants in the LifeSteps group, participants found the intervention helpful and would recommend it to other YMSM. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many intervention sessions with participants starting in 2020 were conducted remotely, such as by phone or videoconference. This transition was described as helpful for many participants as it offered more flexibility in attending the sessions. Because of this, many participants suggested maintaining an in-person or remote option for the intervention.

Study Implications

This study shows that a multi-session intervention on PrEP adherence like LifeSteps may be acceptable and helpful for YMSM who wish to use PrEP. Larger studies are required to confirm these results.

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