



LGBT HEALTH

HOW MUCH DO WE KNOW ABOUT HIV AMONG MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN IN LEBANON?

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In many countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), men who have sex with men (MSM) are a hard-to-reach population, due to the social stigma and, in some cases, illegality of homosexuality. When compared to most other MENA countries, Lebanon is one of the safest for LGBT groups, where they enjoy relatively higher social capital. Its capital city, Beirut, is one of the most socially progressive cities in MENA, with a vibrant MSM community. The opportunities for HIV prevention are manifold. Yet, we know little about HIV prevalence, incidence and risk factors in MSM in Lebanon.

The HIV epidemic in Lebanon has remained at a plateau for the past 10 years, with relatively few recorded HIV-related deaths and 2206 HUV/AIDS until December 2017. The epidemic is concentrated in MSM and incidence has increased from at least 47.7% MSM of all HIV diagnoses in 2016 to at least 54.15% in 2017. According to a data synthesis, less than 0.01% of the general population and 3.7% of MSM live with HIV. However, we do not yet have unequivocal data on HIV prevalence and incidence in MSM in Lebanon.

The lack of data can be attributed partly to: low rates of HIV testing (25% in 2010 and 38% in 2014 among MSM); high prevalence of sexual risk-taking (more data needed to understand the psychosocial correlates of risk-taking behavior); and HIV care (data unavailable).

There is an urgent need for more reliable data on HIV prevalence, incidence and risk factors associated in Lebanese MSM, as well as the rate and nature of patient engagement with HIV care. However, a systematic research on HIV remains a challenge in Lebanon where social, cultural and religious norms around sexuality contribute to the stigmatisation and exclusion of MSM.

