

Addressing the complex interplay between mental health, substance use, and sexual behavior among MSM in HIV care

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Purpose: To examine the interplay between mental health, substance use, and sexual behavior among HIV-positive men who have sex with men (MSM).

Method: Cross-sectional description of MSM in HIV care enrolled between 2022 and 2023 in the ATHENS study, a prospective multicenter (N=13) cohort study designed to investigate the incidence of acute hepatitis C and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) among MSM in Madrid. Comprehensive data collection was performed at baseline, including questionnaires to assess sexual behavior and drug use in the previous two months before enrollment and validated scales to evaluate anxiety/depression (HADS), impulsivity (Barrat scale), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD scale).

Results: 467 HIV-positive MSM participants were evaluated: median age was 41 (33-49) years, 90% self-identified as whites, 37% were non-native Spaniards, 54% had a university education, and 99% were on ART. Drug use was reported by 44% (cathinones 40%, marijuana 35%, cocaine 26%, and methamphetamines 23%), chemsex by 33%, and slamsex by 7%. Engagement in unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) was reported by 65% (median of 3 sexual acts in the last 2 months) and fisting by 12%. The association between the scales for anxiety, depression, ADHD, and impulsiveness with risky sexual behavior and drug use is shown in the table. A score >3 (moderate-severe) on an ADHD scale was significantly associated with drug use.

Table. Association between mental health scores with unprotected anal intercourse and drug use among MSM on HIV care in Madrid 2022-2023

	UAI, n (%)		Drug use, n (%)	
	Yes (302)	No (163)	Yes (205)	No (260)
HADS for anxiety ≥8	116 (30)	61 (37)	83 (40)	94 (36)
P value	0.834		0.339	
HADS for depression ≥8	48 (16)	32 (29)	40 (19)	40 (15)
P value	0.308		0.241	
ADHD >3	49 (16)	25 (15)	43 (21)	30 (11)
P value	0.802		0.005	
Barratt Impulsiveness Scale				
Low score	191 (33)	106 (66)	131 (65)	166 (64)
P value	0.58		0.909	
Moderate score	98 (33)	52 (32)	67 (33)	83 (32)
P value	0.971		0.82	
High score	2 (1)	11 (4)	4 (2)	9 (3)
P value	0.136		0.332	

Conclusions: Unprotected anal intercourse and drug use are highly prevalent among MSM in HIV care. The association between ADHD symptoms and drug use underscores the need for specific psychological evaluation and interventions to address substance use among MSM. New studies are needed to determine whether the observed symptoms of ADHD are a cause or a consequence of substance use.

General conditions

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