

***“There is no need to leave the beach to test”*: A qualitative study of HIV self-testing knowledge, acceptability, and willingness to distribute HIVST kits among fishermen in western Kenya**

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Background: HIV self-test kits (HIVST) can improve HIV testing uptake by offering added convenience and privacy. Yet HIVST uptake remains limited among high-priority populations, including men and mobile populations. We assessed HIVST knowledge and acceptability among highly mobile fishermen in communities along Lake Victoria, Kenya, participating in a social network study to promote HIVST (#NCT04772469).

Methods: Sixty-five in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with fishermen, including 30 socially-connected men recruited as “promoters”, from 3 fishing communities in Siaya County. Fishermen were purposively sampled based on age (<math><35</math> years) and community for interviews exploring HIVST knowledge, perceived benefits, and concerns. IDIs were audio-recorded, translated/transcribed into English, then inductively coded and analyzed by six researchers using a framework approach.

Results: Most participants were >35 years (56%) and married (83%). Nearly all (98%) participants had heard about HIVST and expressed willingness to use HIVST. About half (44%) learned about HIVST via a prior study. Perceived benefits of self-testing included privacy, convenience, and being able to learn one’s status with the freedom to choose when and where to test, which minimized stigma and work interruptions. Few (N=7) participants had used HIVSTs, all of whom reported ease of use; four had tested with their partner. Perceived barriers to HIVST use included fear of HIV-seropositive results, being unsure of use procedures, and fear of stigma if a kit was discovered. Nearly all socially-connected “promoters” indicated they would distribute HIVST to help their friends know their status. They also acknowledged that some men may not be receptive to receiving HIVST due to fear of being suspected of having HIV. Promoters stressed the importance of approaching HIVST discussions strategically and thoughtfully to garner trust and engagement, and felt they needed training to answer friends’ HIVST questions.

Conclusions: While few fishermen had ever used HIVST, this study found high awareness, positive perceptions, and substantial willingness to use and distribute HIVST to other men. There is a need to bolster awareness of the benefits of HIVST, along with thoughtful dissemination that includes promoter training on minimizing stigma and building trust among this high-risk population.

Ethical research declaration: Yes

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