“First to know my status”: Acceptability of HIV self-testing among South African Men

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BACKGROUND

- Men are less likely than women to test for HIV in sub-Saharan Africa.
- HIV self-testing (HIVST) is increasingly being used as a strategy to improve HIV testing coverage, particularly in men.
- Understanding acceptability of HIVST is necessary to achieve optimal uptake of these new testing modalities.
- Our objective was to characterize men’s experiences of using HIVST.

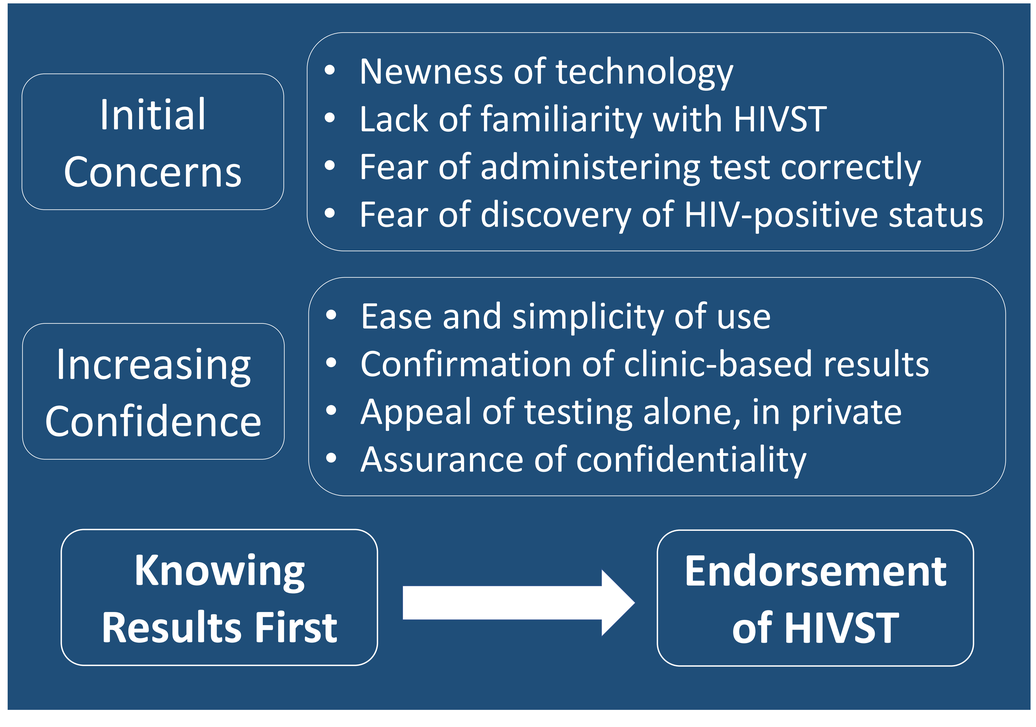
METHODS

- HIVST kits were distributed to 4495 individuals in community-based venues in two regions in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa as part of a large implementation study targeting men.
- Men were offered self-administered oral fluid or blood-based tests.
- They were free to choose to use the tests at the distribution site or at home.
- A subsample of 30 men who received and used HIVST kits took part in a single in-depth qualitative interview
- Interviews covered: (a) test distribution, (b) experiences of using the HIVST, (c) previous testing experiences, and (d) preferences for HIV testing.
- Qualitative data were coded and inductively analyzed to identify themes representing men’s perspectives on and experiences using HIVST.

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RESULTS

- Men responded positively to oral and blood-based HIV self-tests and overwhelmingly preferred self-testing over testing at a health facility.
- Despite initial concerns about being able to administer the test correctly on their own, they found the HIVST kits easy and simple to use.
- Lack of familiarity with HIVST and the newness of the technology fueled some doubts about test efficacy, particularly oral tests.
- Men gained confidence in the accuracy of HIVST when their results confirmed prior clinic-based tests.
- The fear of newly discovering an HIV-positive status through HIVST was an important concern for men, but this was far outweighed by the appeal of testing alone, in private.
- Being able to know their results “first,” without having to trust a health care worker to protect the confidentiality of their results, was unexpectedly empowering for men.
- They reported that HIVST gave them a sense of independence and control over decisions about testing circumstances and disclosure.
- This, in turn, led them to talk about the experience of HIVST to others, generating additional interest in self-testing among their peers.



It is better to test yourself because if you do everything according to the instructions, it is you first who see your results. If you are tested by someone else, you sometimes wonder, what if this person goes to my family and reports that I am infected?

I like the fact that I am the first person to know my status. That is the main thing I liked about HIVST. It depends on me if I inform the next person or not.

HIVST Experience (N=30)	N (%)
Oral-based test (OraQuick)	18 (60%)
HIV-positive	8 (27%)
Never tested	2 (25%)
Newly diagnosed	6 (75%)
Newly linked to ART	7 (88%)

CONCLUSIONS

- Our findings suggest that HIVST is an acceptable testing strategy among men.
- Through the experience of using the tests, men’s perceptions of self-testing appear to evolve from an initial reluctance to an overall endorsement of HIVST.
- Peer distribution of HIVST may be an effective method for scaling up HIV testing in communities where men do not test for HIV.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the men who volunteered their time.

UW ICRC: Meighan Krows, Torin Schaafsma
AHRI: Nondumiso Mpanza, Xolani Ngwenya
HSRC: Nonkululeko Khuzwayo, Lungelo Madlala, Sanelisiwe Majola, Tembeka Mhlakwaphalwa, Zilungile Mvubu, Sabelo Ndlovu, Nkosinathi Ngcobo

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