DID COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS IMPACT HIV TREATMENT AMONG MSM IN CHINA?

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BACKGROUND

Travel restrictions during the COVID-19 epidemic in China have impacted on the daily life and antiretroviral therapy (ART) of people living with HIV, including men who have sex with men (MSM). As China enters a state of routine COVID-19 prevention and control, it is necessary to understand the conditions of ART interruption (ATI) among HIV-infected MSM during and after the lockdown period (23 January to 7 April 2020) to summarize experience on HIV treatment.

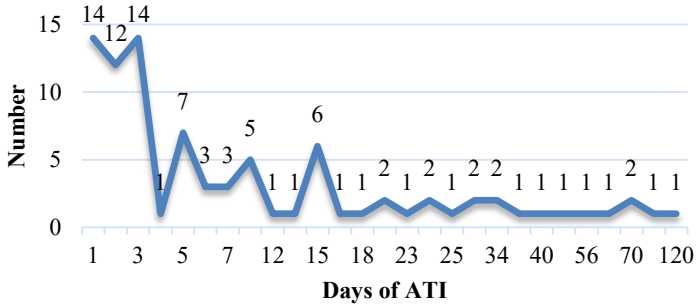
METHODS

A nationwide cross-sectional online survey was conducted among HIV-infected MSM in China in February 2021, using convenience sampling on the WeChat platform called Li Hui Shi Kong. We collected information during and around lockdown period, including socio-demographics, health behaviors such as physical exercise and alcohol drinking, ART maintenance, CD4 and viral load testing. Pearson's Chi-squared test was performed to compare those characteristics between participants who experienced ATI during the lockdown period and did not. Logistic regression analysis was conducted to assess the correlates of ATI.

Timely and effective control measures in China during the lockdown did not result in disastrous health effects to HIV-infected MSM. Emphasis should constantly be attached with dissemination of health behaviors and mobilization of CD4 and viral load testing among these population.

RESULTS

A total of 1296 participants were included in the analysis. The median age was 29.3 years (interquartile range [IQR] 25.2-34.0). 40.9% (n=530) of them did not exercise regularly in the second half of 2019 and 62.3% (n=808) had alcohol drinking. During the lockdown period, 6.8% (n=88) reported ATI experience, and 49.5% (n=629) performed CD4 cell test. Among the participants who took the last CD4 test after the lockdown, more people had not experienced ATI (66.8%) compared to those had experienced ATI (38.6%). HIV-infected MSM using other ART regimen as temporary substitution were more unlikely to experience ATI, including free ART (adjusted odds ratio [aOR] 0.05, 95% confidence interval [CI] 0.02-0.11) and out-of-pocket ART (aOR 0.11, 95% CI 0.01-0.89), which is different from their previous prescription.



Days of ATI among HIV infected MSM with ART during the lockdown period

CONCLUSIONS

COVID-restrictions did not result in significantly negative effects on ART maintenance among HIV-infected MSM in China. In order to reduce the negative impact on HIV-infected MSM, attention should be paid to conducting health behavior education, maintaining ART service and encouraging CD4 and viral load testing during and after public emergencies.

KEY WORDS

Antiretroviral therapy (ART), ART interruption (ATI), HIV, men who have sex with men (MSM), COVID-restrictions, China

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