Virtual Support Improves Client Experiences with an Online HIV Self-testing Service in India

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BACKGROUND

- HIV self-testing (HIVST) can help to efficiently reach vulnerable populations who are hesitant or unable to visit healthcare locations for testing, especially as more affordable tests become available
- In July 2021, we launched a novel web-based HIVST service in India which revealed high positivity (5%) and reached many first-time test takers
- Free HIVST kits were couriered to clients or picked up at select locations
- Virtual counsellors (VCs) were available to clients for pre/post-test counseling and assistance with using the kits, including interpreting and uploading results to the website, and linkage to appropriate services

OBJECTIVE

- To understand how to scale HIVST and maximize efficiency, we assessed barriers and facilitators of the experience through a brief online client survey

SURVEY METHODS

- All HIVST clients who agreed to be contacted later about their experiences were sent an automated WhatsApp message with a link to a web-based self-administered survey
- Links sent October 2021-August 2022
- Survey included basic demographics and their experiences with ordering, taking the test, reporting results, and interactions with VCs

RESULTS

Table 1. Process and client characteristics

	Ordered HIVST *(as of Aug. 2022)*	Completed survey
Clients	5015	305
Received kit	87%	96%
Completed test*		93%
Reported result	82%	90%
Screened positive	5%	5%
Male	74%	85%
Median age (IQR)	26 (23-30)	26 (23-30)
Kits sent via courier	45%	81%
Ordered >1 HIVST kit	9%	23%

**Not collected on the web platform unless result was uploaded*

Web-based HIV self-testing was easy and acceptable in India

Most individuals received help from a virtual counselor, suggesting virtual support might be necessary to maximize impact of self-testing

Figure 1. Client experiences with HIVST service

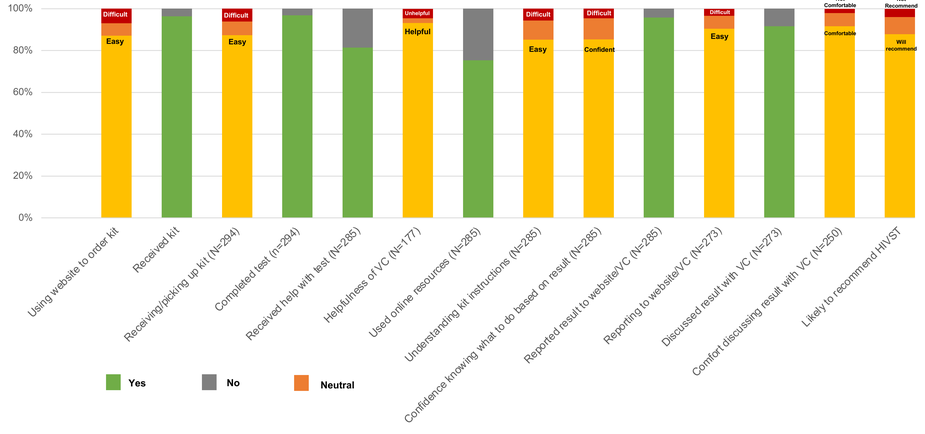


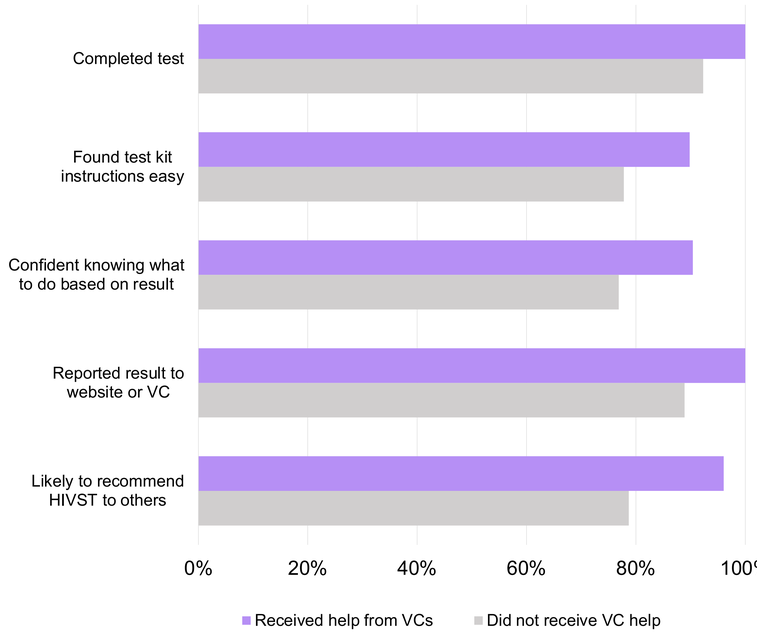
Table 2: Experiences with HIVST service, continued

	n (%)
Where test completed (N=285)	
Own Home	175 (61.4)
Workplace/office	59 (20.7)
Home of relative or friend	37 (13.0)
Outdoor public area	5 (1.8)
Inside public area	3 (1.1)
Other	6 (2.1)
Received help from (N=232)^	
Sexual partner/spouse	10 (4.3)
Friend	33 (14.2)
Family	3 (1.3)
Virtual counsellor (VC)	177 (76.3)
Provider at pick-up location	12 (5.2)
Other	8 (3.5)

	n (%)
Online resources used (N=215)^	
HIVST website	123 (57.2)
WhatsApp	106 (49.3)
YouTube/Facebook/Instagram	73 (34.0)
Other	8 (3.7)
Reason for not reporting result (N=12)	
Did not know how	2 (16.7)
Did not know that I should	1 (8.3)
Did not have time	3 (25.0)
Forgot to report	2 (16.7)
Worried about confidentiality	3 (25.0)
Other	1 (8.3)

**Responses are not mutually exclusive*

Figure 2. HIVST experiences by whether clients received help from virtual counselors (VCs)



Completed test outcome among those that received the test kit (N=294 total, N=177 with VC help, N=117 no VC help); All other outcomes among those that completed the test (N=285 total, N=177 with VC help, N=108 no VC help)

All comparisons statistically significant at p<0.05

CONCLUSIONS

- Nearly all clients were able to easily and confidently order, receive, and use HIVST kits from a web-based service
- Most had interactions with a VC who effectively facilitated the process
- Online platforms and virtual support by trained counselors could improve efficiency, uptake, and linkage of both virtual and in-person HIV prevention and treatment services

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