

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on HIV testing in a global HIV/AIDS support program



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BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic is associated with severe disruptions in health care services and non-pharmacological measures such as social distancing and restrictions had an impact on access to HIV- tests at facilities and outreach activities. The impact of the pandemic on the HIV testing program of AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) was assessed by comparing monthly test activity and outcomes for 2019 (pre-pandemic) and 2020-2021.

METHODS

Observational study using retrospective data from the AHF Global Quality Program, including HIV testing data from 44 countries in Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Europe and Africa*. Information on HIV testing numbers and proportion of positive results from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2021 were compared.

RESULTS

Over 1,000,000 people were tested in the last trimester of 2019. In the first trimester of 2020, the number of HIV-tests decreased for the first time (N=883,928), with a further decrease from April-June 2020, coinciding with Covid-19 pandemic waves (N=545,501).

The number of HIV-tests performed by quarter in 2020 and 2021 ranged from 811,201 to 917,526, not achieving the performance of 2019. A total of 4,311,168 people were tested in 2019, of whom 3.2% (N=138,421) tested positive. In 2020 total number of tests decreased to 3,127,408 but with an increased positivity ratio of 3.5% (N=109,685). In 2021, a total of 3,448,939 people were tested with a 3.3% positivity ratio (N=117,119).

During 2020 and 2021, coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic, a reduction was observed in the number of people tested for HIV, as compared with 2019. The numbers tested decreased by 27% and 20% in 2020 and 2021 respectively and identification of new HIV cases decreased by 21% and 15% respectively.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite inter-country heterogeneity, the COVID-19 period appeared to be associated with a reduction in the number of people tested for HIV, probably related to less access to HIV testing at health facilities, due to restrictions and lockdowns. The slight increase in the percentage of positive tests might be related to the programmatic decisions to intensify testing of sexual partners of PLHIV in health services and a major shift towards health facility-based testing.

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NUMBER OF PERSONS TESTED FOR HIV AND AVERAGE POSITIVITY RATIO 2019 TO 2021, BY MONTH

