



Research Summary: Substance use among Men who have Sex with Men

1. Introduction

This document presents key findings on substance-use among men who have sex with men (MSM) from the MISI 2015 survey. It is hoped that these findings will be useful to inform public health service planning. The *Men who have Sex with Men Internet Survey Ireland 2015 (MISI 2015)* is the largest survey of MSM in Ireland. MSM are a key risk group for HIV and STI transmission. The survey was primarily undertaken to acquire up-to-date information about MSM with regard to HIV and STI knowledge, needs and behaviours. The survey included questions about alcohol, tobacco and drug use.

2. Who responded?

Over three-thousand men from all 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland responded to the online survey. Almost half of respondents lived in Dublin. Respondents were aged between 18 and 80 and the median age was 30. 86% were born in Ireland, 14% were born outside of Ireland. 79% identified as gay, 13% as bisexual, 2% as straight and 5% did not use a term to self identify.

3. Key findings

Alcohol

- Alcohol consumption was very common among respondents. Ninety per cent of men who responded reported drinking alcohol in the last year. Sixty-three per cent reported drinking alcohol at least once a week.
- Regular binge drinking¹ was reported by many. Fifty-eight per cent reported binge drinking on a typical drinking occasion. Almost three-quarters reported binge drinking at least once a month while 44% reported binge-drinking on a weekly basis.
- Younger men and students were more likely to report binge drinking on a typical occasion of drinking, compared to older men and men who were in employment or unemployed.
- Men who were born in Ireland were more likely to report binge drinking compared with men who were born outside of Ireland.
- There was no difference in the levels of binge drinking among men living in different parts of Ireland.

Smoking

- Over one-third of men in the study were current smokers. Twenty-two per cent were daily smokers and 13% were occasional smokers.
- Younger men and men with lower levels of education were more likely to smoke, compared with older men and men with higher education levels.
- Younger smokers tended to smoke fewer cigarettes per day compared to older smokers.

¹ Binge drinking was estimated by grouping the number of standard drinks typically consumed on a typical occasion of drinking as six or more standard drinks

- There was a very high prevalence of smoking among HIV-positive men. Fifty-three per cent of the men who reported they were HIV positive were smokers.

Drugs

- Thirty-six per cent of men reported using recreational drugs in the last year. The most commonly used drugs were cannabis (28%), ecstasy (17%) and cocaine (13%).
- Younger men (under 25), students, men living in Dublin and HIV-positive men were more likely to report taking recreational drugs in the last year.
- Seven percent of respondents reported using substances that have been linked to chemsex² i.e. crystal methamphetamine; GHB/GBL; ketamine; mephedrone. Men who lived in Dublin, had higher levels of education and who were HIV positive were more likely to report using these drugs. Men in their late twenties were most likely to have used these drugs in the last year.
- Two percent of men reported having injected drugs in the past. HIV-positive men were much more likely to have reported injecting drugs.
- Nitrite inhalants (poppers) were used by one third of men in the last year. Men with higher levels of education and who lived in Dublin were more likely to use poppers. Their use peaked among men aged 40-49 (45%) and among HIV-positive men (68%).

4. How do the MISI 2015 substance use findings compare with the general population?

The approach to data collection for MISI 2015 was convenience sampling. The study design was robust and comparable to similar international studies with MSM and provides a picture of a very large sample of MSM in Ireland. However the sample cannot be considered representative of all MSM in Ireland and cannot be directly compared to general population surveys that used random sampling approaches.

Recent general population studies have reported:

- 53% of men in Ireland reported binge drinking on a typical drinking occasion³
- 24% of men in Ireland were current smokers⁴
- 27% of Irish adults had ever used drugs in their lifetime⁵

Although caution is required when comparing results, the substance use figures from the general population surveys are noticeably lower than the MISI findings. International studies report that binge drinking, smoking and drug use appear to be very prevalent among MSM. What is clear from MISI 2015 is that the findings relating to substance use are concerning, there are clear differences among MSM as regards attitudes and behaviours to substance use, and these differences can relate to age, education levels, employment status, geographic location and HIV status. These results will be helpful in directing public health messaging and prevention strategies.

The full MISI 2015 report can be accessed online at:

http://www.hpsc.ie/A-Z/SpecificPopulations/MenwhohavesexwithmenMSM/File_15696_en.pdf

² 'Chemsex' is a term used to describe sex under the influence of psychoactive drugs. These substances can be used to enhance sexual pleasure, but they are associated with increased sexual risk behaviour

³ Department of Health & Ipsos Mrbi. 2015. Healthy Ireland Survey 2015. Summary of Findings.

⁴ *Ibid*

⁵ National Advisory Committee on Drugs. National Drug Prevalence Survey in 2010/11