

## Publication

### Why do marital partners of people living with HIV not test for HIV? A qualitative study in Lusaka, Zambia

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Knowledge of HIV status is crucial for HIV prevention and management in marital relationships. Yet some marital partners of people living with HIV decline HIV testing despite knowing the HIV-positive status of their partners. To date, little research has explored the reasons for this.; An exploratory qualitative study was undertaken in Lusaka, Zambia, between March 2010 and September 2011, nested within a larger ethnographic study. In-depth interviews were held with individuals who knew the HIV-positive status of their marital partners but never sought HIV testing (n = 30) and HIV service providers of a public sector clinic (n = 10). A focus group discussion was also conducted with eight (8) lay HIV counsellors. Data was transcribed, coded and managed using ATLAS.ti and analysed using latent content analysis.; The overarching barrier to uptake of HIV testing was study participants' perception of their physical health, reinforced by uptake of herbal remedies and conventional non-HIV medication to mitigate perceived HIV-related symptoms. They indicated willingness to test for HIV if they noticed a decline in physical health and other alternative forms of care became ineffective. Also, some study participants viewed themselves as already infected with HIV on account of the HIV-positive status of their marital partners, with some opting for faith healing to get 'cured'. Other barriers were the perceived psychological burden of living with HIV, modulated by lay belief that knowledge of HIV-positive status led to rapid physical deterioration of health. Perceived inability to sustain uptake of life-long treatment - influenced by a negative attitude towards treatment - further undermined uptake of HIV testing. Self-stigma, which manifested itself through fear of blame and a need to maintain moral credibility in marital relationships, also undermined uptake of HIV testing.; Improving uptake of HIV testing requires a multi-pronged approach that addresses self-stigma, lay risk perceptions, negative treatment and health beliefs and the perceived psychological burden of living with HIV. Strengthening couple HIV testing services, including addressing conflict and addressing gendered power relationships are also warranted to facilitate joint knowledge, acceptance and management of HIV status in marital relationships.

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