

Assessing the impact of online self-sampling for STIs and HIV (ASSIST study)



Sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are a serious public health concern in the UK. Many STIs remain asymptomatic for long periods, so testing is crucial for treatment and to limit their spread. That said, uptake of testing remains low, particularly among some populations. This is in part due to barriers to accessing sexual health clinics and other face-to-face services.

What are we doing?

Online postal self-sampling (OPSS) allows service users to order a kit online, take their own samples at home and post them to a lab to be tested. Its adoption and usage have increased significantly across England in recent years, before and since the COVID-19 pandemic, but there is limited evidence on what impact OPSS has on health inequalities, access to care, clinical and economic outcomes, and on the factors that influence the implementation and sustainability of OPSS services.

We are evaluating OPSS in three areas - Birmingham, London and Sheffield – where OPSS was introduced at a different time, using a different commissioning and delivery model. We have interviewed service users, staff and stakeholders from all three areas to understand their perspectives of OPSS. We have also analysed documents, local and national service usage data, and we have undertaken observations at clinics.



How will it help?

Analysing this data together will allow us to understand what works, for who and in what context when implementing an OPSS service. Our findings could support service commissioners and providers who deliver sexual health through greater understanding of this model of care, contributing to the development of national quality measures and standards of care for online sexual health services. We also hope to provide useful transferable learning to other conditions and aspects of public health care. Full findings are expected spring 2024.

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