Young Adults and HIV Vaccine: Determinants of the Intention of Getting Immunized

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Considerable effort is being made worldwide in the development of an efficient vaccine for HIV. However, it is important to undertake studies on the acceptability of HIV immunization among the population, especially among the segments that are at high risk of infection. Young adults are a group considered to be at high risk for HIV transmission. Although adolescents and young adults do not exhibit the highest rate of HIV infection, much of their behaviour is known to involve risk for contracting HIV. Furthermore, given the relatively long incubation period of the virus before the appearance of the first symptoms of HIV, many infected individuals could have contracted the virus when they were teenagers or young adults. Thus, it appears that this population will be among the first to be targeted by immunization campaigns as soon as an effective vaccine is available. Consequently, understanding the factors that influence the willingness of young adults to be immunized for HIV is particularly relevant since it will address the possible barriers to an effective vaccine for this segment of the population.

Recently, some researches have focussed on young adults’ intention of getting immunized for HIV once a vaccine becomes available. In general, the results have shown that a significant percentage of young adults was either uncertain about or against receiving HIV immunization. One study revealed that 53% of undergraduate students would accept getting the HIV vaccine; another study among college students showed that only 30% of the respondents had a high intention of getting HIV vaccination. These studies also identified some factors influencing the decision to receive HIV immunization. Perceived susceptibility to HIV, perceived severity of HIV and perceived benefits of vaccination were related to a strong intention of receiving the vaccine. In addition, the vaccine’s characteristics (efficacy, safety) had an influence on its acceptance.

Additional factors could also affect the decision to receive a vaccine for HIV, notably the influence of social norms and the attitudes about vaccination. In a recent study, attitudes about HIV immunization were found to be significant predictors of the intention of accepting HIV immunization. Thus, the present study focussed on the psychosocial factors explaining the intention of getting an HIV vaccine. The Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) was used to assess the predictors of young adults’ intention of accepting the HIV vaccine once it becomes available. This model provides a comprehension of the psychosocial determinants of the intention of performing a given behaviour by exploring the relative importance of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control on the intention.

According to the TPB, the attitude represents the subjective evaluation of the possible benefits and disadvantages related to the performance of a given behaviour. The subjective norm reflects the perceived expectations that specific salient individuals or groups may have regarding the adoption of a given behaviour. Finally, the perceived behavioural control is determined...
by the individual’s perception of the presence or absence of requisite resources and opportunities, as well as anticipated obstacles and impediments, in order to perform or not perform a given behaviour.

**METHODS**

The present research was carried out with the collaboration of college students who were residents in a dormitory adjacent to a college located in the Quebec City metropolitan area. Potential respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and their informed consent was obtained. Young adults who agreed to participate were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire. A total of 136 completed questionnaires were handed back (97.8% response rate; 81 women and 55 men).

The psychosocial constructs were measured directly by means of two items each, except for the attitude which was assessed by means of six items. Seven-point bipolar scales were used to report answers on each item of each variable. The intention of receiving HIV vaccine once it becomes available was a composite score derived from these two questions: “If a vaccine for HIV became available, I would accept of getting it...” and “I evaluate my chances (low/high) of accepting of receiving the HIV vaccine once it becomes available”.

**RESULTS**

The socio-demographic and behavioural characteristics are presented in Table I. Among the total sample, the mean age was 18.6 years. A majority of the respondents (69%) was sexually active. For this subgroup, the mean age at their first sexual intercourse was 16.1 years. Most of them (51%) had had three different sexual partners or more since their first sexual intercourse. With regard to condom use, 72% of the sexually active respondents indicated that more than half of all sexual intercourses they had had in the past had been protected by a condom.

**DISCUSSION**

This exploratory study has highlighted some of the psychosocial factors influencing the intention of young adults to get an eventual HIV vaccine. The results suggest that a large percentage of young adults would accept getting immunization against HIV if a vaccine were available. Acceptance of a hypothetical HIV vaccine was lower in previous studies. A possible explanation of this difference could be that with the recent advances in HIV/AIDS...
drug therapies, young adults are now more optimistic about the development of an efficient HIV vaccine.

Attitudes and perceived behavioural control were found to be strongly associated with the intention of getting the vaccine. Attitude was, however, the main determinant explaining the intention of accepting an HIV vaccine. This means that evaluative judgement is an important motivator for getting HIV immunization. The perception that getting the vaccine would result in more advantages than disadvantages is thus the main factor in young adults’ intention of accepting immunization once a vaccine becomes available.

Indeed, if young adults consider getting an HIV vaccine as something safe, responsible, sensible, useful, relaxing and comforting, their intention of getting immunized will be higher.

The second predictor of the intention of accepting HIV immunization was the perceived control upon the behaviour. Perceived Behavioural Control shows how easy or difficult the adoption of the behaviour is likely to be. Therefore, HIV vaccination is more likely to be accepted by young adults if there are few barriers, either real or perceived, to their decision to accept the vaccine. However, further studies are needed in order to investigate in more detail the barriers underlying this theoretical construct.

Third, it is worth noting that in the present study, subjective norm was not found to explain a significant percentage of the variance in the intention of getting an HIV vaccine. This could indicate that, at the present time, the social influence may not be related to HIV vaccine acceptance. Thus, accepting to get HIV immunization is evaluated as a personal decision not influenced by social expectations. It remains to be seen if this will change once an HIV vaccine is found.

Overall, the results suggest that future HIV immunization campaigns aimed at young adults should provide complete and relevant information about efficacy, safety, benefits, and positive consequences of vaccination. This knowledge opens the discussion on the type of psychosocial determinants that could influence immunization behaviour in general. In this regard, the TPB could be used in future studies of immunization acceptance in diseases other than HIV, such as influenza.

Finally, there are some limitations to this study. For instance, the sample was small and limited to a particular group, thus the results cannot be generalized to all young adults. In future studies, it would also be important to evaluate the impact of HIV vaccination on risky sexual behaviour. As many authors have stated, it will be important to combine behavioural change with vaccination campaigns in order to prevent negative outcomes. Without carefully planned mass immunization campaigns, an increase in risk behaviour is likely to be associated with the decreased threat of HIV/AIDS resulting from vaccination. This latter aspect will have to be considered in the development of immunization programs.

REFERENCES


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