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Substance use and risk behaviour patterns among people who inject drugs

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Background: Substance use and injecting drug use in particular are related to health damages, reduced quality of life and life expectancy. Injecting drug use is a risk factor for acquiring infectious diseases among people who inject drugs (PWID). The aim of the study was to assess the risk behavior related to the use of intravenous psychoactive substances among PWID in Lithuania.

Methods: In 2023 a cross sectional study using respondent driven sampling (RDS) of active intravenous drug users (n = 370) was conducted in 5 different sites across Lithuania. RDS is a sampling methodology based on peer-referral in underserved populations that cannot be sampled randomly. Descriptive statistical and regression analyses were conducted using SPSS 23.0.

Results: 78% of the sample were males, 22% - females. Age mean is 40.6 years, SD-7.7. The first injecting drug was used at the age of 18 (mode). 69% of PWID received drug dependence treatment at least once in life. 70% of the PWID in harm reduction services are also in the substitution therapy programmes. Fentanyl is the main substance for every second respondent which is injected 3 times a day and commonly used with alcohol (64%). 79% of PWID during the last injection used sterile needles and syringes. 45% of respondents reported overdosing during the last 12 months and half of all PWID had naloxone for death prevention. Nearly 70% were tested for TB and syphilis during the last 12 months.

Conclusions: PWID are mainly males who began injecting drugs at 18 years. Unsafe injecting behaviour (frequency and mode), using alcohol were related to lower participation in health care services for PWID.

Main messages:

- Lower participation in health care services is related to behavioural risk factors.
- Ongoing research is needed to assess the factors determining engagement into healthcare of PWID.