

Potential Misperceptions about Real-Life Chemsex Issues and Behaviour Changes due to COVID-19 and Monkeypox on Community Level: an Austrian MSM-Survey

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BACKGROUND

Chemsex seems to be a growing issue in European metropolitan regions increasing the need of awareness among people at risk and multidisciplinary support in healthcare facilities for Chems-Users. To meet this demand, the Austrian Chemsex Network combined different professions and published the website chemsex.at 1.5 years ago to provide guidance for Chems-Users seeking support. Aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of Chemsex Network measures, COVID-19 and Monkeypox on the Chemsex behaviour of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Austria.

METHODS

MSM in Austria were invited to an online survey in October 2022. The questionnaire assessed Chemsex knowledge, Chemsex behaviour, preferred Chemsex support facilities, and feedback on the chemsex.at guidance tool. Results were compared to a similar survey conducted in March 2021. Questions concerning COVID-19 and Monkeypox were included.

RESULTS

198 MSM completed the survey, mainly from Vienna (74.6%) and 20-49 years old (82.8%). Compared to the first survey (163 participants, 82.8% Viennese, 86.5% 20-49 years), knowledge on Chemsex remained largely the same with 41.4% and 43.5% feeling well or very well informed, respectively. The proportion of MSM contacting health care professionals for support was comparable (55.6% vs. 50.9%). More MSM rated the guidance tool chemsex.at as good or very good (81.4% vs. 66.7%).

Chems-Users seeking support would primarily contact addiction help facilities or psychotherapists (27.2%) followed by physicians (22.3%). By contrast, Non-Users would more probably contact AIDS-Hilfen (24.2%) and less likely addiction-specific or psychotherapeutic facilities (7.4%).

67% of Chems-Users assumed that the COVID-19 pandemic increased Chemsex frequency in the community. However, only 41.8% reported an individual increase. 35.9% of Chems-Users reported reduced Chemsex frequency due to Monkeypox, but only 17.5% believed that there was a reduction on community level.

Figure 1: Age Distribution of Chems-Users

The proportion of Chems-Users increases with the age of 30 and remains constant at higher ages.

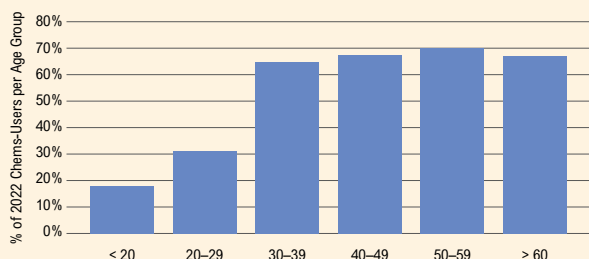


Figure 2: Differences Regarding Chemsex Knowledge, Chems-Use, and Seeking Support between 2021 and 2022

The level of information on Chemsex and the proportion of Chems-Users among survey participants was comparable between 2021 and 2022. Also the percentage of Chems-Users seeking support from facilities and institutions like physicians, psychotherapists, addiction help facilities, Austrian AIDS-Hilfen, queer counselling centers as well as the internet and other media remained largely the same.

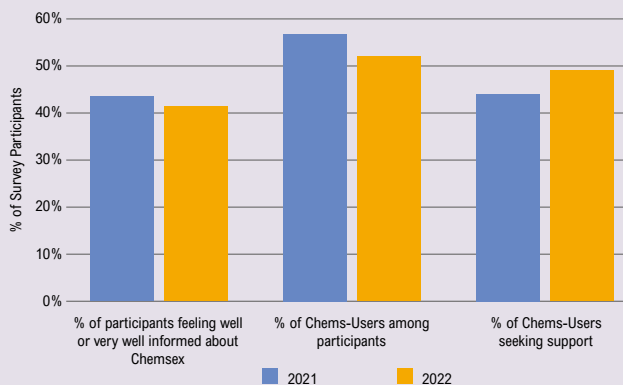


Figure 3: Preferred Support Facilities and Institutions of Chems-Users and Non-Users Participating in the 2022 Survey

Chems-Users prefer different support facilities than Non-Users. Whereas Chems-Users would rather seek support from physicians, psychotherapists, and addiction help facilities, Non-Users would rather consult the Austrian AIDS-Hilfen or the internet.

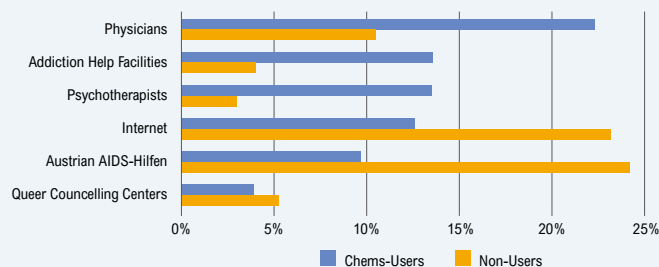


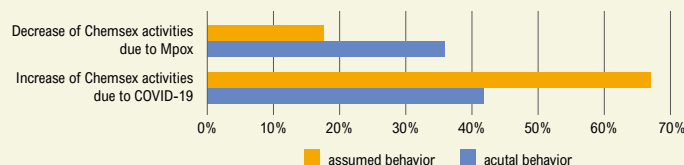
Figure 4: Rating of the Website chemsex.at, the Information Tool from the Austrian Chemsex Network

More study participants said that they found the website chemsex.at good to very good after its relaunch in 2022 compared to 2021 (81.4% versus 66.7%).



Figure 5: Assumed versus Actual Changes in Chemsex Behavior due to COVID-19 and Mpox

Assumptions on changes in Chemsex frequency due to COVID-19 and Mpox do not reflect actual changes of individual Chemsex behavior. (Survey Results 2022)



CONCLUSIONS

Although revision of the chemsex.at guidance tool led to a better rating, information levels stayed comparable within the past 1.5 years. Interestingly, the perceptions about COVID-19- and/or Monkeypox-driven changes of Chemsex frequency at community level do not reflect the individual behaviour of participants. Differences of preferred support facilities between Chems-Users and Non-Users may indicate a potential misperception and underestimation of problematic issues in real Chemsex-life. Therefore, our findings underline the need for ongoing sustainable information and prevention work.