How Coronavirus Shutdowns Could Cause an Uptick in HIV Cases

Experts also predict a rise in sexually transmitted infections.

May 28, 2020 By Trent Straube

Last year, President Trump launched an initiative that aimed to lower new HIV infections in the country by 75% in five years and by 90% in a decade. Then the new coronavirus arrived and shut down life as we know it. As a result, health experts tell Agence France-Presse, HIV rates will likely increase.

But wait. If people are staying home (and not hooking up), then that should mean fewer transmissions, right? Possibly, in the very short term. The problem arises when people do become sexually active again, which may happen before the economy and businesses fully open—including health clinics that offer testing for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

“It’s very likely that people’s risk behaviors will resume before they will have full access to prevention services,” Travis Sanchez, an epidemiologist at Emory University in Atlanta, told AFP. “I think that combination could lead to increases in HIV transmission.”

Sanchez and his colleagues conducted an online survey of 1,000 men who have sex with men (MSM). Findings showed that although 50% of them reported using hookup apps less frequently and having fewer sexual partners during the coronavirus pandemic, 25% also said they couldn’t get tested for STIs because clinics were closed.

In Washington, DC, staff at Whitman-Walker Clinic echo Sanchez’s findings. The clinic had to halt its walk-in testing services, which were used daily by nearly 50 people.

There are other reasons HIV cases may increase. Matthew Spinelli, MD, an HIV specialist in San Francisco, told AFP he’s concerned that people with HIV may skip going to the hospital or clinic for fear of contracting the coronavirus. This, coupled with anxiety due to the crisis, may lead folks to skip taking daily HIV meds or seeking treatment when needed. That could lead to spikes in their viral load and increased risk of transmitting HIV to others.

Another potential challenge is a shortage of contact tracers—health care workers who track down the sexual partners of individuals who test positive for HIV or another STI. Many of these workers,

Jezebel reports, are now using their skills to locate people potentially exposed to coronavirus.

In fact, a survey of STI contact tracers across the nation found that 83% of them are now focused on COVID-19 cases, reports Business Insider. What's more, 66% of clinics said they offer fewer tests and health screenings due to the new pandemic.

Perhaps the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) best summed up the situation when it said it expected a decrease in the number of STI cases in the short term but an increase in the long term.

Regarding HIV, the CDC sounded a similar note, saying, "The decrease in the availability of testing and limited access to treatment and prevention services may result in more infections and poor health outcomes in the long run."

In related POZ articles, see "It's a Terrible Time for COVID-19 to Strike HIV, STI and Hepatitis Programs" and "What Do We Know About Trump's HIV Plan for America?" To see how many AIDS service organizations are responding to the new pandemic, check out "Can You Get HIV Services During COVID-19?"

In related news, keep in mind that novel coronavirus guidance and concerns for unique populations may vary. For example, see "3 Reasons COVID-19 Poses a Higher Risk for the LGBTQ Population," "UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus" and the similar article for people with cancer.

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