Good and Bad News About HIV Treatment for Children

Globally, a child contracts HIV every 100 seconds. A new, affordable treatment is available, but the COVID-19 pandemic hinders access.

December 25, 2020 By Trent Straube

Last year, only 53% of children and infants living with HIV across the globe were properly diagnosed and getting lifesaving treatment. But affordable, child-friendly HIV treatment recently became more accessible than ever, thanks to recent advances and cost negotiations involving a generic version of the HIV drug dolutegravir.

To get the word out, international HIV and health organizations have called for better access to HIV treatment for children and infants. A joint statement posted by the World Health Organization (WHO) urges a massive scale-up of access to treatment to end pediatric AIDS.

> Global health partners call on countries to urgently expand access to optimal, child-friendly HIV treatment. #EndAIDS @UNAIDS @UNICEF @PEPFAR @WHO @EGPAF @UNITAID @CHAI_healthhttps://t.co/1YUMxJcLKB
>
> — The Global Fund (@GlobalFund) December 22, 2020

The WHO recommends a dolutegravir-based regimen as first-line treatment for children. The generic 10 milligram child-friendly tablets were speedily approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration as a result of a collaboration with Unitaid, ViiV Healthcare, the Clinton Health Action Initiative (CHAI) and generic suppliers. To improve access to the drug, Unitaid and CHAI negotiated a deal that lowers the medication's cost by 75% for children living with HIV in low- and middle-income countries.

“For the first time, children living with HIV in low- and middle-income countries will have access to the same first-line antiretroviral medication at the same time as those in high-income countries,” said Iain Barton, CEO of CHAI, in the WHO joint call for action. “The partnership should serve as a model to remove barriers that hinder development of pediatric formulations to deliver top-line medications quickly and affordably.”

“This has the potential to be a true game changer for children with HIV,” added Meg Doherty, director of Global HIV, Hepatitis and STI Programmes at the WHO. “We must do all in our power to help countries get this new pediatric [dolutegravir formulation] to all the children who need it.”

Also signing on to WHO’s statement are the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) and its AIDS program (UNAIDS), the U.S. President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, CHAI, Unitaid and The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

“Children are still getting infected at alarming rates, and they are still dying from AIDS. This was even before COVID-19 interrupted vital HIV treatment and prevention services”

New @UNICEF report reveals a child is infected with #HIV every 100 seconds https://t.co/7uxLW6SKZQ

— Avert (@Avert_org) December 7, 2020

Scaling up pediatric dolutegravir is vital. Not only is it highly effective and easier to take, thus likely to boost adherence, but it is also desperately needed. As the WHO reports, 95,000 children died of preventable AIDS-related illness in 2019. What’s more, of the 1.8 million children ages 14 and younger estimated to be living with HIV, 850,000 are undiagnosed or not on treatment.

A recent report from UNICEF found that 320,000 children and adolescents contracted HIV in 2019. This translates to one every 100 seconds. That was before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only made matters worse—notably by disrupting treatment and services, lowering HIV services by 10% or more in many countries compared to pre-pandemic data.

In related news, Charles Lyons, president and CEO of the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation, penned an opinion piece titled “Prioritizing Children in the COVID-19 Response,” which urges us to learn from HIV. You can read more HIV content related to children and adolescents on the POZ.com hashtag #Pediatric. Sample articles include “Still Here,” a look at the challenges young long-term survivors continue to face, and “Why This New Strawberry-Flavored HIV Med Is a Game Changer.”

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