2021 Top HIV Science Stories

COVID-19, HIV vaccine and cure news, and long-acting HIV treatment and prevention topped the news again this year.

December 21, 2021 By Liz Highleyman and Ian Anderson

In the second year of the pandemic, COVID-19 remained a major topic of interest for POZ readers (Nos. 5, 10 and 13).

The good news is that a majority of people with HIV can mount an effective immune response against the coronavirus (No. 19). Studies show that most HIV-positive people respond well to COVID-19 vaccines, though people with uncontrolled HIV and low CD4 counts may not fare as well. Health officials urge everyone—especially those at higher risk, including people with HIV—to get a booster for maximum protection. For those who don't respond to vaccines, COVID-19 pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) may be an option. Advocates continue to demand equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines worldwide, just as they fought for global access to HIV treatment two decades ago.

News about HIV vaccines was also popular. In August, researchers reported more disappointing results from a large trial of an HIV vaccine using a traditional approach. But, coming full circle, the messenger RNA (mRNA) technology used in highly effective COVID-19 vaccines—which grew out of HIV research—is now being explored for HIV vaccines (Nos. 1, 7 and 17). Although HIV is much harder than COVID-19 to prevent with a vaccine, early results appear promising. Click here for a feature on the long quest for an HIV vaccine.

POZ readers also sought HIV cure news (Nos. 3 and 15). Unfortunately, a man in Brazil who appeared to be in long-term remission without antiretrovirals—one of last year's top stories—has experienced viral rebound (No. 6). Another top story last year was about an American woman whose own immune system may have cured her HIV. This year, researchers reported on a woman in Argentina who may represent a second natural cure (No. 20).

Long-acting therapies for HIV treatment and prevention that don't need to be taken every day also sparked interest (No. 16). In January, the Food and Drug Administration approved once-monthly Cabenuva (cabotegravir/rilpivirine), the first complete injectable HIV treatment regimen (Nos. 4 and 14). Injectable cabotegravir for PrEP was approved in December. Two other long-acting antiretrovirals, lenacapavir and islatravir, have also shown promise for HIV treatment and prevention (Nos. 8 and 9). However, islatravir hit a snag late this year after people taking the drug in clinical trials experienced reduced CD4 counts.

In June, the 40th anniversary of the first medical report of AIDS offered an opportunity to reflect on how far we've come with HIV treatment and the challenges that remain.

Here are the POZ science news stories with the most views this year:

1. Scientists Are Working on mRNA Vaccines for HIV, Flu, Cancer and More
Posted: January 18

2. Trans People Who Have Gender-Affirming Surgery Are More Likely to Have Undetectable HIV
Posted: March 12

3. New Approaches for HIV Cure Research
Posted: August 11

4. FDA Approves Cabenuva, the First Complete Long-Acting Injectable HIV Treatment
Posted: January 21

5. Moderna COVID-19 Vaccine Generates Long-Lasting Immune Memory
Posted: October 13

6. Brazilian Man With HIV Is No Longer in Remission
Posted: March 23

7. New Vaccine Approaches Show Early Promise for HIV
Posted: May 18

8. Islatravir PrEP Implant Could Prevent HIV for a Year
Posted: March 10

9. Lenacapavir Shows Promise for Long-Acting HIV Treatment and Prevention
Posted: March 15

10. CDC Reports Rare Breakthrough COVID Cases Among Fully Vaccinated
Posted: June 14

11. Therapeutic Vaccines May Help Control HIV Off Treatment
Posted: May 10

12. 8% of Teens With HIV Had AIDS-Defining Illnesses After Transitioning to Adult Care
Posted: July 9

13. Lasting Immunity Found After Recovery From COVID-19
Posted: January 30

14. People With HIV Are Highly Satisfied With Cabenuva
Posted: July 5

15. A Closer Look at the Long-Term Impact of HIV Cure Research
Posted: September 24

16. Can HIV Treatment Be Taken Just 4 Days a Week?
Posted: April 20

17. Researchers Launch Trial of mRNA Vaccines for HIV
Posted: August 25

18. Monkey Study Points to Potential Way to Clear HIV Reservoirs
Posted: May 25

19. 75% of People With HIV Show Good Immune Response to COVID-19 Virus
Posted: August 4

20. A Second Woman May Be Naturally Cured of HIV
Posted: November 15

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