3 Reasons COVID-19 Poses a Higher Risk to the LGBTQ Population

And how the novel coronavirus is (or isn't) altering the lives of health care providers, drag queens and Grindr users

March 16, 2020 By Trent Straube

The LGBT population may be at increased risk for COVID-19, the disease caused by the new coronavirus. To get the word out, over 100 national and local organizations have signed an open letter initiated by a coalition of six organizations.

The letter spells out the main reasons for the heightened concerns. It also lists 10 ways those involved with the COVID-19 response—including health officials and the media—can ensure that LGBT people are treated properly during coronavirus outbreaks.

Coronavirus guidance and concerns for unique populations may vary. For example, see the POZ magazine article "UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus" and the related article for people with cancer.

According to the letter, three main factors increase the vulnerability of the LGBTQ community to COVID-19:

- The LGBTQ population uses tobacco at rates that are 50% higher than the general population. This is relevant because COVID-19 is a respiratory disease that is harmful to smokers.

- The LGBT population has higher rates of cancer and HIV, both of which can compromise a person's immune system and make someone more vulnerable to COVID-19.

- The LGBTQ population still faces discrimination, including in health care settings. This makes many people hesitate to seek care.

The letter also notes that because LGBTQ seniors may fear harassment or discrimination, they are less likely than straight elders to be involved in health and wellness programs for seniors. Over 3 million LGBTQ older people are living in the United States; they are especially vulnerable to COVID-19, which has a higher mortality rate among older people in general.

“As an organization dedicated to the health and well-being of LGBTQ communities, we urge LGBTQ individuals to practice measures recommended by public health experts, such as frequent handwashing, to prevent the spread of this virus,” said Scott Nass, MD, MPA, president of GLMA Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality, in a statement accompanying the letter. “At the same time, like our colleagues who joined the open letter, we call on public health officials to ensure the LGBTQ community is considered and included in the public health response to COVID-19 based on potential risk factors that exist in our community.”

Among the recommendations, the letter asks media and health providers to tailor COVID-19 messaging for LGBTQ people and to ensure that data collection includes sexual orientation and gender identity. What’s more, the letter points out that Asian Americans have already been subjected to racial profiling and xenophobic responses related to the novel coronavirus; it urges all COVID-19 responses to avoid such discrimination and to urge others to do the same.

The initial signers include the National LGBT Cancer Network, GLMA Health Professionals Advancing LGBTQ Equality, Whitman-Walker Health, SAGE, New York Transgender Advocacy Group and National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance.

Meanwhile, the San Francisco Department of Public Health released a news update titled “Trans Care During COVID-19.” It underscores much of the data above, noting that transgender people are five times more likely to be living with HIV compared with the general population.

As LGBTQ online magazine them. reports, health centers catering to the community are looking into unique ways to practice social distancing and reduce trips to clinics. For example, New York’s Callen-Lorde Community Health Center is considering providing HIV meds for three months at a time rather than one as well as assessing clients by phone prior to in-person visits.

As for more social interactions, them. notes that some drag queens are canceling shows and some gay men who use Grindr are opting to chat instead of hooking up in the flesh.

For a collection of related articles click #COVID-19 or visit #Coronavirus. You’ll find articles such as “How to Practice Harm Reduction in the Age of COVID-19” and “UPATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus.”

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