Americans Get a D on HIV PrEP and an F on U=U

Despite the introduction of prevention pills and proof that undetectable equals untransmissible, Americans are still ignorant about HIV.

September 1, 2021 By Heather Boerner

Nearly a decade after the introduction of HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and more than 10 years since researchers proved that effective HIV treatment prevents sexual transmission of HIV (known as Undetectable Equals Untransmittable, or U=U), Americans still haven't gotten the memo. Or at least not enough of them have, according to GLAAD's 2021 State of HIV Stigma Report.

This is the second year of the survey, which is funded by the Gilead COMPASS Initiative. Between January 14, 2021 and January 29, 2021, researchers asked 2,517 adult residents of the United States a variety of questions about their knowledge about HIV, PrEP, U =U and their attitudes—and stigma—toward people living with HIV.

What the study revealed might not surprise most people living with HIV or those who love them. Compared with last year, fewer people (48% versus 51%) felt knowledgeable about HIV in general. And nine years after the Food and Drug Administration approved Truvada (tenofovir disoproxil fumarate/emtricitabine) for PrEP, only 64% of people knew about it. Even fewer, 42%, knew that antiretroviral medication prevents the transmission of HIV—and that's 10 years after research proved this fact.

Americans' discomfort with people living with HIV was still unacceptably high. More than half of heterosexual people would be uncomfortable knowing that their health care provider was HIV positive. What's more, 44% would also be uncomfortable knowing that their hairstylist or barber was living with HIV and 35% reported that they would be uncomfortable knowing a teacher had HIV. Job discrimination based on HIV status is illegal.

Those differences were slightly more pronounced in the South and the Midwest, where 54% of non-LGBTQ Americans said they'd be uncomfortable with a medical professional who was living with HIV. But it was still high in the Northeast and the West, with 45% in each region expressing discomfort.

All this despite the fact that 56% of respondents had seen media coverage of some aspect of

HIV—or perhaps because of it. The study didn't characterize how accurate and updated those stories were.

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