Can an App Help Young Gay Black Men Living With HIV Take Their Meds?

A $3.5 million grant to the University of Illinois at Chicago will help researchers find out.

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Gay Black men remain one of the hardest-hit groups in today's HIV epidemic. What's more, those who are HIV positive are less likely to achieve an undetectable viral load, which puts their health at risk and makes it easier for them to transmit the virus. A five-year $3.5 million grant hopes to give these young men a tool to adhere to their meds.

Funded by the National Institutes of Health, the grant goes to researchers at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) who are developing an app called My Personal Health Guide, according to a UIC press release.

A pilot study of the app showed that before using the app, users adhered to their meds 62 percent of the time; afterward, they adhered 80 percent of the time.

"In our pilot trial of the app, users emphasized protecting their privacy regarding their HIV status and didn't want features that were intrusive or that other people could see or hear," said Mark Dworkin, MD, MPH, professor of epidemiology at the UIC School of Public Health and principal investigator on the grant, in the press release.

"The app supports medication adherence by providing information spoken simply by a realistic avatar that explains why adherence is so important to their health.," Dworkin explained. "It also teaches about individual medications used to treat HIV, as well as their potential side effects. The app will be 'gamified,' as they say in the industry, meaning an educational game will be added so that the more you use it, the more features become unlocked, which may motivate sustained engagement with the app."

The app's goal is to support behaviors that lead to adherence and to provide answers about medication and HIV.

Using feedback from participants, researchers will develop an updated version that will be evaluated by HIV-positive gay Black men in Chicago, Atlanta and Jackson, Mississippi.

"Reducing viral load, and even better, getting to undetectable levels, is not only good for the

individual, but it significantly helps reduce the risk of spreading the virus to others," Dworkin said, referring to what's known as U=U, the fact that undetectable virus is untransmittable sexually. "And because strict medication adherence provides the best chance to reduce viral load, any tools we can give people to stick to their meds will ultimately prevent new infections and also keep people healthy."

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