Does the Coronavirus Affect the HIV Reservoir?

A grant from AIDS group amfAR helps researchers explore that question and also study COVID-19 “long-haulers” living with HIV.

February 1, 2021 By Trent Straube

How does COVID-19 affect people living with HIV? The intersection of the two diseases is the topic of the latest research grant from amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research. Specifically, a $700,000 grant will help scientists explore two questions:

- What risks do COVID-19 long-haulers with HIV face? The term “long-haulers” refers to people who continue to experience negative symptoms, often for months, after they clear the COVID-19 infection.

- Does SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, affect the HIV reservoir, which refers to HIV that hides within dormant cells and can’t be eradicated by HIV treatment?

Annukka Antar, MD, PhD, of Johns Hopkins University, and Michael Peluso, MD, of the University of California, San Francisco are looking to answer the first question. The amfAR grant will help them study and compare three groups of people in the United States: those who are HIV positive and also survived a COVID-19 infection, those who are HIV positive but did not have COVID-19 and those who are HIV negative but had COVID-19.

Exploring the second topic are Mathias Lichterfeld, MD, PhD, of Massachusetts General Hospital, and his colleagues. They’ll compare the size of the HIV reservoir before and after a coronavirus infection and see whether a strong immune response to COVID-19 affects the size of the HIV reservoir.

“The effects of COVID-19 on people living with HIV have been a driving concern for us,” said Rowena Johnston, PhD, amfAR’s vice president and director of research, in a press release announcing the grants. “We look forward to finding answers to the next set of issues concerning longer-term consequences of co-infection and how these may impact future care.”

“We’re greatly relieved to learn that people living with HIV appear to be at no greater risk than anyone else of hospitalization or death as a result of COVID-19,” added amfAR chief executive officer Kevin Robert Frost. “But there are many questions about SARS-CoV-2 and its potential interactions with HIV that remain unanswered, and we hope these research projects will yield important new knowledge about both viruses.”

This isn’t the first coronavirus research funded by amfAR. Last year, the group launched the amfAR Fund to Fight COVID-19. For details, see the July article “AIDS Group amfAR Awards Two Grants to Research COVID-19.” The article includes a video from a series exploring the intersections between the two diseases.

For a collection of HIV-related articles in POZ, click #COVID-19, where you’ll find “UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus.” and “Does COVID-19 Affect CD4 Counts and HIV Viral Load?” To learn more about COVID-19, see the Basics section of COVIDHealth.com.

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