Coronavirus Delays PrEP Rollout in England

The country's National Health Service was to provide the HIV prevention drug for free starting this spring.

June 9, 2020 By Trent Straube

In March 2020, a POZ headline announced: "HIV Prevention PrEP to Be Readily Available in England (Finally)." It was welcome news for a country whose HIV advocates had struggled for years to get the med in the hands of those at risk for the virus. But the coronavirus pandemic has delayed the mass distribution of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), reports Attitude magazine.

"We will continue to work to ensure that rollout happens as a matter of urgency and push for a firm timeline from the government on when uncapped access to PrEP will be available across England," Debbie Laycock, of the HIV charity Terrence Higgins Trust, told news media.

As POZ previously reported, England's National Health Service (NHS) was to provide the daily tablet for free starting in April. PrEP has been available there but only to a limited number of people participating in a three-year trial.

For several years, the NHS had claimed it wasn't required to provide PrEP because it's in the business of treating HIV not preventing it. Eventually, the health program changed its stance. (PrEP is available in neighboring Scotland and Wales.)

It's estimated that about 103,800 people were living with HIV in the United Kingdom in 2018 and that 7,500 were unaware of their status. (The United Kingdom consists of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.)

In the United States, PrEP is available as Truvada and Descovy tablets; both consist of two meds, and both are manufactured by Gilead Sciences. For more details, see "What's the Difference Between Truvada and Descovy for PrEP?"

It's unclear which med would be provided as PrEP in England, but in 2018, a high court in Britain overturned the patent extension on Truvada; it was reported that generic versions could cost nearly 90% less.

Scientists estimate PrEP to be about 99% effective among men who have sex with men and to be

greater than the current 88% to 90% estimate for heterosexual men and women. For more details, see "How Well Do U=U and PrEP Work? The CDC Updates Its Answers." In the United States, PrEP is available as Truvada and Descovy tablets; both consist of two meds, and both are manufactured by Gilead Sciences. For more details, see "What's the Different Between Truvada and Descovy for PrEP?"

In related news, see "Sex—and PrEP During the Pandemic," in which experts offer advice on how to stop and restart PrEP in the era of social distancing, and "What Happens to PEP Prescribing During Lockdown?" which looks at post-exposure prophylaxis prescriptions at a famed London sexual health clinic.

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