UPDATED: COVID-19 Could Cause a Shortage of HIV Meds This Summer

The global supply of tenofovir and six other important generic drugs must be ensured, warns a UNAIDS analysis.

July 8, 2020 By Trent Straube

Editor's note: This article was originally posted June 24, 2020, and was updated to include new data from the World Health Organization released in conjunction with the 23rd International AIDS Conference (AIDS 2020).

COVID-19 lockdowns and border closings issued to stop the spread of the virus are posing a new health challenge: They're disrupting the production and distribution of generic HIV meds in low- and middle-income countries.

In fact, widespread delays are expected this summer if immediate actions aren't taken, warns the United Nations Joint Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), based on information gathered from eight drugmakers in India that produce over 80% of the generic HIV meds in the world.

"It is vital that countries urgently make plans now to mitigate the possibility and impacts of higher costs and reduced availability of antiretroviral medicines," said Winnie Byanyima, UNAIDS executive director in a press release. "I call on countries and buyers of HIV medicines to act swiftly in order to ensure that everyone who is currently on treatment continues to be on it, saving lives and stopping new HIV infections."

A survey from the World Health Organization (WHO) of countries across the globe also warns of shortages. According to a WHO press release, 73 countries said they are at risk of stock-outs of HIV meds and 24 countries reported that they are already in critically low supply of antiretrovirals.

The UNAIDS analysis can be read and downloaded in a six-page PDF titled "The impact of the COVID-19 response on the supply chain, availability and cost of generic antiretroviral medicines for HIV in low- and middle-income countries."

The shortages are the result of cutbacks in air and sea transportation, which means raw materials and packaging materials are in scarcer supply. Plus, physical distancing and lockdowns have meant fewer employees to manufacture the meds and distribute them. The situation could also translate to higher costs of the drugs that are available.

The UNAIDS report flagged six pharmaceutical ingredients that are in high demand for HIV generic meds and are at greater risk for shortages:

- Tenofovir
- Efavirenz
- Zidovudine
- Lopinavir
- Ritonavir
- Abacavir
- Darunavir.

UNAIDS recommends that governments and suppliers take steps now to ensure a steady supply of meds. Several international organizations—including the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, the World Health Organization and the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria—are working with the drug manufacturers, reallocating funding and implementing strategies such as telemedicine to ensure that the HIV med supply remains stable.

As of June 2019, about 24.5 million people are taking HIV meds. According to UNAIDS, a six-month interruption of the supply of antiretrovirals could result in a half million additional AIDS-related deaths—and that's just in sub-Saharan Africa. For more about that, read the May 2020 article, "How COVID-19 Could Cause an Extra 673,000 AIDS Deaths."

In related news, keep in mind that novel coronavirus guidance and concerns for unique populations may vary. For example, see "3 Reasons COVID-19 Poses a Higher Risk for the LGBTQ Population," "UPDATED: What People With HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus" and the similar article for people with cancer.

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