Latinos and HIV

Latino communities are disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS.

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Latinos in the United States are a diverse group that includes people of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American and South American origin. Collectively, Latino communities have been hit hard by the HIV epidemic.

While they make up about 19% of the U.S. population, Latinos accounted for 27% of all new HIV cases in 2018, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Only African Americans have a higher rate of new HIV diagnoses. Among the estimated 1.2 million Americans living with HIV that year, around 274,000 were Latino. According to the Office of Minority Health at the Department of Health and Human Services, Latino men and women are about four times more likely to have HIV than their non-Hispanic white counterparts.

Among Latino men, those who have sex with men account for the largest proportion of new diagnoses (85%); 30% of gay and bisexual men diagnosed with HIV in 2018 were Latino. Among Latina women, the most common risk factors are heterosexual contact (87%) and injection drug use (12%). Overall, the rate of new cases among Latinos has remained stable in recent years, but it has risen among young men ages 25 to 34.

The CDC estimates that five out of six Latinos living with HIV have been tested and are aware of their status. Testing is important because those who know their status can start antiretroviral treatment, which halts disease progression and prevents transmission of HIV, as people who achieve an undetectable viral load do not transmit the virus. Unfortunately, compared with HIV-positive people overall, Latinos have a lower likelihood of receiving HIV care (61%), remaining in care (49%) and achieving viral suppression (53%). Latinos are also less likely to be taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent HIV.

In addition, Latinos are at a greater risk for other health problems that can make it more difficult to manage HIV and increase the likelihood of complications. The three leading causes of death for Latino men in the United States are heart disease, cancer and unintentional injuries; for Latina women, these are cancer, heart disease and stroke. Latinos are twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to have diabetes, or elevated blood sugar, which can cause a host of health problems. (See Ask POZ, page 14.) Although Latinos do not have higher rates of hepatitis B or C, they are more prone to fatty liver disease, which can lead to cirrhosis and liver cancer.

While HIV does not progress faster among Latinos, and antiretroviral treatment is equally effective for this population, Latinos are less likely to receive adequate health care than non-Hispanic white people. Reasons include lower average income and education level, lack of health insurance, language barriers, concerns about immigration status, discrimination and stigma. What's more, according to the CDC, Latinos may have a high level of distrust of the health care system.

Many AIDS service organizations offer services specifically for Latinos living with HIV. In addition, some clinics and hospitals have Spanish-speaking staff, including doctors, nurses and social workers, or can provide translators to help patients communicate. Don't hesitate to ask for this kind of help if you need it.

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