How Do You Get PrEP if You Live in a Rural Area With No Docs Nearby?

If you're in rural Iowa, you can use TelePrEP to access the HIV prevention pill.

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Rural Iowans have better access to HIV prevention, thanks to the launch of TelePrEP, an innovative telehealth program that offers medication delivery by mail and in-home visits via secure videoconferencing.

Currently, the daily pill Truvada is the only form of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) that's been approved by the Federal Drug Administration to prevent an HIV-negative person from contracting the virus. When taken correctly, PrEP reduces risk by over 99 percent. But access to the medication is an issue for rural residents, Michael Ohl, MD, a disease specialist at University of Iowa Health Care and the medical director of TelePrEP, told The Loop, a University of Iowa publication.

"We need to try different approaches, such as this telehealth technology, to make sure PrEP is available to those who need it, regardless of where they live," Ohl said.

Access is a challenge to HIV care in rural Iowa. In other Midwestern states, HIV cases are mostly concentrated in big cities, Angie Hoth, coordinator for TelePrEP, told Iowa Public Radio. "Whereas Iowa has approximately 25 to 30 percent of its HIV cases occurring in a rural part of the state, which is quite unique compared to our neighbors."

The telehealth service involves pharmacists, physicians and public health professionals from the Signal Center for Health Innovation, the Iowa Department of Public Health, Johnson County Public Health and the UI Health Care Departments of Infectious Disease and Pharmaceutical Care. The pilot program is funded by the Iowa Department of Public Health.

According to the Iowa Department of Public Health, HIV cases in the state increased by 11 percent from 2015 to 2016, and rates of sexually transmitted infection, including chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis are also rising.

TelePrEP seeks to reduce the number of new HIV infections throughout the state and decrease the cost of treating HIV over the next five years.

To learn the POZ Basics about HIV prevention, click here.

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