No, Truvada and Descovy PrEP Are Not "AIDS Vaccine Pills"

More HIV prevention misinformation is coming from the right.

September 23, 2021 By Heather Boerner

Contrary to a New York Post editorial opposing part of the $3.5 trillion infrastructure bill now before Congress, the two currently approved pills to prevent HIV acquisition are not "AIDS-vaccine pills."

The article, which is packed with bombastic language against the "cure-crushing" "poison pill" of the Lower Drug Costs Now Act plan to pay for itself through costs to pharmaceutical companies, offhandedly contains the misinformationthat "Descovy and Truvada are, essentially, AIDS-vaccine pills."

Truvada (tenofovir disoproxil fumarate/emtricitabine) and Descovy (tenofovir alafenamide/emtricitabine) are in fact daily or on-demand HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) pills—which a recent report found most Americans misunderstand. The pills are around 99% effective in preventing someone who is HIV negative from acquiring the virus if they are exposed to it during sex. But unlike a vaccine, which teaches the immune system how to fight the virus, the prevention pills never teach the immune system to fend off HIV. Instead, you have to take the pills every day or before and after sex for them to continue working. If you stop taking them, they stop working.

PrEP—and the HIV vaccines under study—aim to protect against infection with the virus. AIDS develops when a person with HIV does not take the safe, effective antiretroviral (ARV) medicines available today. Many people living with HIV today have never developed AIDS, and many of those who did are now healthy thanks to effective treatment—so healthy they can run marathons and donate organs to others more ill than them. Plus, effective ARVs allow people living with HIV to have sexual relationships without fear of transmitting the virus to their sexual partners. This is because when taken consistently, HIV treatment is so effective that it reduces viral load to an undetectable level and eliminates the risk.

Unfortunately, the reality of the HIV vaccine world is that despite decades of research into how to train the immune system to recognize and fight the virus, trials so far have been unsuccessful; indeed, the latest failure reported just last month. But researchers keep trying. Indeed, another large HIV vaccine trial is underway in the United States and elsewhere around the world right now,

and several smaller studies are exploring new approaches, including mRNA HIV vaccines that use the same technology as highly effective COVID-19 vaccines.

That doesn't mean people—many of them on the right of the political spectrum—don't insist on continuing to spread misinformation about HIV and its treatment and prevention. Indeed, this is the second reference to a so-called AIDS vaccine in a week. The first came when Georgia Governor Brian Kemp, a Republican, falsely claimed that an "AIDS vaccine" existed and that it had failed because "people wouldn't take it early on because it was mandated."

"Same scenario, different year," he quipped.

Kemp also referenced a failed AIDS vaccine mandate to reporters in July 2021 as a reason he would oppose a COVID-19 vaccine mandate. And then there's former President Donald Trump, who falsely claimed in June 2020that there was an AIDS vaccine and that it worked.

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