Magic Johnson on the Parallels Between COVID-19 and HIV

Watch the sports legend on a CNN town hall. He's got opinions—and advice.

April 15, 2020 By Trent Straube

Magic Johnson, the basketball icon who's been living with HIV nearly 30 years, has a few words to share about the new coronavirus: "I'm here today to tell all minorities: You can get this virus, and you can die from it. Do everything you're supposed to do. Stay at home. Keep yourself a safe distance from everyone."

Johnson offered that advice during a recent CNN town hall about the coronavirus, which can cause the potentially lethal respiratory disease COVID-19. (Below is part 4 of the town hall in its entirety, featuring Johnson and CNN's Anderson Cooper and Sanjay Gupta, MD.)

During the nearly 25-minute segment, Johnson offered his thoughts about similarities and differences between the HIV epidemic and the current COVID-19 crisis, including the persistence of racial disparities in health care.

"I first announced I had HIV almost 30 years ago. There was only one drug, AZT, at the time, and now there's over 30 drugs. Now people can really live a healthy life because of those drugs," he said. "With this coronavirus, hopefully, we can find a drug that can prolong life. But first we've got to make sure that every American can get tested. There's a shortage of tests.… The reason I'm still living is because of early detection. I had a physical, and it came up that I had HIV, and that saved my life."

The NBA great credits his longevity to other factors as well: "Between me working out and keeping a positive attitude as well as taking the cocktail [of HIV meds]," he says, "that's what made me live for now almost 30 years."

In addition to HIV, African Americans experience higher rates of numerous other health issues, Johnson added, citing obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure as examples. He suggested that getting better information and diagnostics to Black communities is part of the solution. "We want tests in urban areas and doctors who look like us," Johnson said.

“I think right now is similar to what happened with HIV and AIDS. When I announced [I had HIV in 1991], it was a white gay man’s disease. Blacks thought they couldn’t get HIV and AIDS,” Johnson said (you can watch the 1991 announcement above). “It’s the same thing with the coronavirus. It reminds me of going back 30 years. And we were all wrong, and the [HIV] numbers switched from being a white gay men’s disease to a minorities’ disease, which it is today. Same thing here. Misinformation went out to communities and said Blacks can’t get coronavirus, and everybody’s been wrong about that—whoever’s been saying that in the Black community. In our community, we’ve got to do a better job of making sure everybody knows they can get this virus.”

Stay-at-home orders during the COVID-19 crisis has put sports on hold indefinitely. Johnson said he wants sports to return only when it’s safe—even if that means games without fans in the seats for a while. In the meantime, the hoops star stressed that everyone needs to practice social distancing and remain at home. He even recommended some television programming to watch: classic NBA games.

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 Liver Disease Need to Know About the New Coronavirus” and similar articles regarding people with HIV and people with cancer.

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