Alarming Dual Pandemics: COVID & HIV/AIDS

NO ONE HAS TO GET AIDS TODAY!

November 17, 2021 By Joyce Mitchell

Anyone who thinks HIV/AIDS is no longer an alarming concern, especially as COVID-19 grabs headlines, must revisit where we've been—and where we are now. The two pandemics have far too many similarities, and COVID can be life-threatening to many HIV-positive individuals.

Many people living with HIV may be at a higher risk for contracting the coronavirus for a number of reasons. And in both pandemics, under-represented communities have been hit the hardest. That's because under-resourced communities have less access to preventive care and treatment.

Though the HIV/AIDS pandemic is taken more for granted these days, it's far from disappeared. In fact, young people of color are contracting HIV at numbers making heads spin. New research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) shows that 1-in-2 gay or bi black men will be diagnosed with HIV during their lifetime. These numbers are staggering.

As of 2019 according to the CDC, about 1.2 million people in the US have acquired HIV. And, about 13% of those, don't know they're infected and are likely continuing to infect others. That's why prevention and education efforts remain front and center.

Testing is key. Knowing your HIV status allows you to get treated if you are positive, and stop the chain of infections. In California, the state with the highest number of HIV infections, we know that early detection and treatment is our best defense. When a person gets treated, it knocks the HIV virus down and that person is no longer infectious to others.

Still, while treatments have helped tame the virus into undetectable levels, the number of long-term HIV survivors continues to grow. While this is good news in terms of life expectancies, it also means special care considerations for older HIV-positive individuals who may be experiencing co-morbidities that can compromise their immune systems.

And this is where the dual pandemics collide. People who've lived with HIV for years, even with undetectable viral loads, could begin developing other diseases as they age. That puts them at higher risk for contracting and dying of COVID-19.

Again, the good news is that people treated for HIV are living long and productive lives. In fact, the

number of people living with HIV who are 50-years and older increased from about 40 percent in 2011 to almost 50 percent in 2015. That number is expected to grow by 25 percent by 2025. But the new risk to this growing, older immune-compromised population could be COVID.

As people age, they typically take more medications and are more vulnerable to side effects, complicating management of HIV/AIDS. Research indicates that aging people living with HIV often experience long-term inflammation issues, and cardiovascular, kidney, liver, bone and neurologic diseases.

Add to that, some people can acquire HIV drug treatment resistance to one or more anti-retroviral medications as they age. Those are the life saving meds that prevent HIV from turning into full blown AIDS.

Clearly, all of this is a threat to the immune system – and in some cases, can turn deadly. Compromised immune systems from the co-morbidities can make people living with HIV more at risk for contracting coronavirus disease. The war of the two pandemics is very relevant—and very real. And like COVID, there still is no cure for HIV/AIDS.

Yes, COVID-19 dominates the news, but don’t be fooled. HIV/AIDS has not gone away. Information and awareness are key. Both pandemics have been highly politicized but one thing is for sure. With education and prevention—at least—NO ONE HAS TO GET AIDS TODAY.

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