How COVID-19 Could Cause an Extra 673,000 AIDS Deaths

Mathematical models show that HIV gains in sub-Saharan Africa could be lost, say UNAIDS and WHO.

May 12, 2020 By Trent Straube

HIV service disruptions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic could result in as many as 673,000 extra AIDS-related deaths in sub-Saharan Africa by the end of next year, according to the projections of experts assembled by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

This number is in addition to the average number of people in the region who die of HIV-related causes, including tuberculosis. In 2018, for example, it's estimated that AIDS claimed about 470,000 lives there.

The predicted spike in mortality could end up being the result of people not accessing lifesaving HIV treatment. In addition, the health care system could become overburdened by the demands of COVID-19, the potentially fatal disease caused by the new coronavirus. This could mean a decrease in—or the end of—viral load testing, condom distribution, HIV testing and male circumcision to prevent HIV.

What's more, the region could see increases in mother-to-child transmission of HIV, with HIV cases among children climbing by as much as 104%.

"The COVID-19 pandemic must not be an excuse to divert investment from HIV," said Winnie Byanyima, executive director of UNAIDS, in a press release about the mathematical modeling. "There is a risk that the hard-earned gains of the AIDS response will be sacrificed to the fight against COVID-19, but the right to health means that no one disease should be fought at the expense of the other."

To get a handle on how COVID-19 might impact HIV in the region, the researchers analyzed potential disruptions to HIV testing, prevention and treatment over a period of three or six months. The half-year model estimated that between 471,000 and 673,000 additional people could die of AIDS-related illness.

Nearly 25.7 million people in the region were living with HIV in 2018, with about 16.4 million (64%)

of them taking HIV meds.

In an earlier, related press release, UNAIDS urged countries to remain vigilant and focused on HIV during the COVID-19 crisis. To that end, UNAIDS and its partners in the Global HIV Prevention Coalition published a series of documents spelling out ways countries could safeguard the health of vulnerable people during these turbulent times. Suggestions include steps on preventing COVID-19 in low- and middle-income countries, providing condoms and lubricant and other HIV prevention services during the COVID-19 pandemic, and addressing violence against women and children.

“COVID-19 is impacting almost every country and community, but the global HIV epidemic hasn’t gone away,” Byanyima said in that press release. “People are still having sex. People are still using drugs. During the COVID-19 pandemic, everyone must be given the tools they need to be safe and to protect themselves from HIV. Human rights are a cornerstone of HIV prevention and must be a cornerstone of the COVID-19 response.”

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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