How Do COVID-19 Fears Affect People Living With HIV?

Watch two AIDS experts discuss the links between COVID-19 and HIV—including hydroxychloroquine.

April 8, 2020 By Trent Straube

An AIDS doctor and researcher in Minnesota says his patients living with HIV are “anxious” and “scared” about contracting COVID-19, the potentially fatal respiratory disease caused by the novel coronavirus.

“We’re writing prescriptions at a higher frequency for anxiety-related symptoms and for sleeping and that sort of thing,” said Timothy Schacker, MD, adding that as far as he knew, none of the patients had COVID-19.

“What I’m hearing,” he continued, “is that employers aren’t taking them seriously, and they’re very concerned because they’re having to be crowded into conference rooms, and yet they don’t have a normal immune system, and they don’t want to disclose why they don’t have a normal immune system. That creates even more anxiety. Those are the kinds of challenges they have right now, and our clinic is spending a lot of time helping people through those challenges.”

That insight arrives during a videotaped discussion between Schacker, who is also a professor of medicine and the director of the Program in HIV Medicine at the University of Minnesota, and Rowena Johnston, PhD, the vice president and director of research at amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research.

Johnston interviewed Schacker as part of amfAR’s efforts to inform the public about the intersection of HIV and COVID-19 research. Schacker offers a unique perspective because he is also involved in COVID-19 clinical trials. (You can watch their full seven-minute discussion at the top of this article or on this YouTube page.)

Schacker is currently working on two COVID-19 clinical trials involving hydroxychloroquine, the med that President Trump keeps promoting, much to the consternation of the media and many medical experts. While the drug has long been used to prevent and treat malaria, it has yet to be proved effective in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19.

Schacker’s research with the med involves using it as a post-exposure prophylaxis once a person

has been exposed to the new coronavirus to see whether it can prevent infection; another trial looks at whether hydroxychloroquine can prevent people with COVID-19 from become seriously ill.

What's more, the clinical trials are being conducted over the internet—a necessity in this age of social distancing. People interested in participating can learn more by reading this University of Minnesota COVID-19 article or emailing covid19@umn.edu. Participants receive either hydroxychloroquine or a placebo via FedEx and conduct follow up via the internet.

In many ways, HIV scientists are well-prepared to take on COVID-19 research, Schacker said. "HIV is where we learned how to do clinical trials rapidly, where we learned how to get drugs through the FDA [Food and Drug Administration] rapidly. So we've taken that toolbox and shifted it over and applied to SARS-CoV-2 infection," he says, referencing the proper name of the new coronavirus that causes COVID-19.

But he does express a big-picture HIV concern to Johnston.

"We can't lose sight of the fact that we live in a world with 35 million people who are infected with HIV and will continue to be infected with HIV," Schacker said. "We haven't quite solved that problem yet. I worry as this [COVID-19] pandemic goes on—and it will, and we're going to be working on this for some time—what happens to HIV? You know, we haven't cured it."

To learn more about amfAR's coronavirus efforts, see "AIDS Researchers at amfAR Channel Expertise to Fight COVID-19."

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 HIV Need to Know About the New Coronavirus" and the similar article for people with cancer.

Go to poz.com/tag/coronavirus for our continuing coverage of COVID-19.

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