FDA Eases Its Ban on Blood Donations From Gay and Bi Men

Men who have sex with men can donate blood and plasma if they've abstained from sex for three months, instead of a year.

April 2, 2020 By Trent Straube

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) revised its ban on gay and bisexual men donating blood and plasma. The new recommendations state that men who have sex with men (MSM) can donate blood if they have not had sex in the previous three months. Since 2015, the recommendation required 12 months of abstinence from sex.

> Victory! After weeks of pressure from GLAAD and others, @US_FDA is lowering the deferral period on men who have sex with men from 12 months to 3 months. This victory, however, remains imperfect. We'll keep pushing for the ban to be lifted entirely. https://t.co/uAVkU7A9HY pic.twitter.com/PsYO3qgwlk
>
> — GLAAD (@glaad) April 2, 2020

The news was announced in a tweet by LGBTQ advocacy group GLAAD. Last month, the organization launched a petition pressuring the FDA to update the restrictions in light of COVID-19, the potentially fatal disease caused by the novel coronavirus, and the resulting need for more blood donations.

According to a GLAAD press release, the FDA explained its reasoning in an email to the advocacy group:

> “To help address this critical need and increase the number of donations, the FDA is announcing today that based on recently completed studies and epidemiologic data, we have concluded that the current policies regarding the eligibility of certain donors can be modified without compromising the safety of the blood supply. The policy changes that we are announcing for immediate implementation are set out in three guidance documents and are expected to remain in place after the COVID-19 public health emergency ends.

> “Based on our evaluation of the totality of the scientific evidence available, we are revising the 2015 recommendations for reducing the risk of HIV transmission by blood products including: for male donors who would have been deferred for having sex with another man; the agency is changing the recommended deferral period from 12 months to 3 months.”

GLAAD notes that the FDA’s changes also apply to female donors who have had sex with gay or bi men. You can download a full report on the FDA’s revised guidelines on FDA.gov.

Today’s @US_FDA news is a step in the right direction but the U.S. is still not the leader that we need to be. We will not stop pushing until gay and bi men are treated like others and the 3 month deferral becomes a 0 month deferral. #EndTheBloodBan https://t.co/xtOsLG4Bhh

— Sarah Kate Ellis (@sarahkateellis) April 2, 2020

“LGBTQ Americans can hold their heads up today and know that our voices will always triumph over discrimination,” said GLAAD president and CEO Sarah Kate Ellis in the GLAAD press release. “This is a victory for all of us who spoke out against the discriminatory ban on gay and bisexual men donating blood. The FDA’s decision to lower the deferral period on men who have sex with men from 12 months to 3 months is a step toward being more in line with science but remains imperfect. We will keep fighting until the deferral period is lifted and gay and bi men, and all LGBTQ people, are treated equal to others.”

Shortly after the FDA’s new restrictions were announced, Ellis tweeted that the “news is a step in the right direction but the U.S. is still not the leader that we need to be. We will not stop pushing until gay and bi men are treated like others and the 3 month deferral becomes a 0 month

deferral.” What’s more, the petition will remain live and won’t be taken down until the ban is completely removed.

GLAAD’s petition in March garnered 20,000 signatures, and several lawmakers also pressured the FDA and Trump Administration to rethink its ban.

> Our country is facing a severe blood shortage due to COVID-19. Now more than ever, the @US_FDA must end its discriminatory blood donation ban for gay & bisexual men. @SenatorBaldwin & I are once again urging the FDA to shift from its antiquated policy to one based on science. https://t.co/zJYhN6867x
>
> — Elizabeth Warren (@SenWarren) March 27, 2020

In an article earlier this week, NBC highlighted the nation’s growing need for blood products, especially the antibody-rich plasma of people who have recovered from COVID-19. A gay New Yorker who fit that description and who is HIV negative wanted to donate plasma for the vital coronavirus research but was turned down because he had not abstained from sex for 12 months and because he was taking Truvada as PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, which is used to prevent HIV and is a sign that a person is sexually active. For more details, see “Doctors Can’t use COVID-19 Antibodies From Gay Men or Anyone Taking PrEP.”

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 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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