HIV Clinical Trials Lack Female Participants, and That's a Huge Problem

Women make up half of the HIV population, but the virus affects them differently than men.

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About 35 million people are living with HIV globally, and slightly over half of them are women. But as The New York Times reports, most HIV clinical research relies on gay men. In fact, an analysis by amfAR, The Foundation for AIDS Research found that only about 11% of participants in HIV cure trials were women.

This disparity is important to note because men and women do not respond the same way to HIV. For example, women progress faster to AIDS and are more likely to have strokes and heart attacks. In some cases, women also respond differently to HIV meds. Even without HIV in the equation, it is known that the immune systems of men and women exhibit differences.

"If we're going to find a cure [for HIV], it's important that we find a cure that actually works for everybody," Rowena Johnston, PhD, vice president and director of research at amfAR, told the Times.

The amfAR analysis looked at other HIV research. It found that women made up about 19% of participants in trials for HIV meds and 38% in vaccine studies.

The Times article also explores the challenges in including more women in studies. Unlike gay men, who were hard hit in the epidemic's early days and were quick to enroll in trials and develop support networks around HIV, many women with the virus are isolated and may not be able to participate in trials because they need help with children and transportation. What's more, in the African- American community, mistrust of the medical community is a common issue.

In related news in POZ, read "Many Women on HIV Treatment Are at Risk of Developing a Detectable Viral Load" and learn more about amfAR's Johnston in "Why Women Are a Vital Part of HIV Cure Research [VIDEO]."

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