



A Tale of Two Pandemics

HIV/AIDS and COVID-19 pose different threats, but some of the same tools may defeat them

By Tamara E. Holmes

In the last six months, COVID-19 has transformed the world with [26 million confirmed cases of illness and by claiming 860,000-plus lives](#). The global pandemic also has had an indelible impact – not only on the well-being of people living with HIV/AIDS – but potentially on the trajectory of the HIV/AIDS epidemic itself.

“COVID is threatening to erase a whole generation of effort that we have put into the fight against AIDS and HIV,” [Olga Osminkina-Jones, senior vice president](#) for the consumer goods company Reckitt Benckiser, said this summer during the 23rd International AIDS Conference, also known as AIDS 2020: Virtual.

Indeed, a [new survey by the World Health Organization](#) (WHO) found 73 countries at risk of antiretroviral therapy (ART) shortages because of the pandemic and two dozen others with “critically low stock” or supply disruptions.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) reports that a six-month total disruption in HIV treatment in sub-Saharan Africa could lead to an additional 500,000 deaths over the next year. Even a 20% disruption in treatment could result in another 110,000 deaths.

SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, also threatens to derail HIV prevention efforts. [Researchers in Boston found that people of color and those under the age of 27](#), in particular, were less likely to refill their prescriptions for pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) during the pandemic and noted an overall decrease in PreEP initiations.

The COVID-19 crisis also has drummed up another familiar theme: Black people being disproportionately impacted by disease.

Gregorio Millett, [vice president and director of public policy at amfAR](#), The Foundation for AIDS Research, shared data at AIDS 2020: Virtual from a new [paper entitled *Assessing Differential Impacts of COVID-19 on Black Communities*](#). Researchers found that counties with larger Black populations accounted for nearly half of the COVID-19 cases and deaths in the United States.

To explain how the viruses intersect, the International AIDS Society released *COVID-19 and HIV: A Tale of Two Pandemics*, a report offering suggestions about how to avoid



HIV prevention and treatment interruptions during this time. Recommendations [include](#) providing people living with HIV/AIDS with antiretroviral prescriptions that last longer

than one month, creating multiple pickup points for refills and shifting prevention messages to virtual platforms.

Some wonder whether the push to find an antidote for COVID-19 will detract from progress on an HIV vaccine. No dollars are being diverted from HIV/AIDS as longtime efforts to find a vaccine continue to move forward, said [Dr. Anthony S. Fauci](#), director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, adding that lessons learned in the battle against HIV/AIDS may ultimately help fight COVID-19.

As we wait for effective vaccines, another question emerges: Will Black Americans – among the most vulnerable to both viruses – benefit?

A recent Pew Research Center survey found that only [54% of Black Americans](#) said they would take a COVID-19 vaccine, compared to 72% of all Americans.

“Medical mistrust has been a consistent theme and challenge within the Black community,” said Raniyah Copeland, president and CEO of the Black AIDS Institute, who also spoke at AIDS 2020: Virtual. “It’s rooted in the very real experiences that Black people have had in this country when it comes to institutions in general experimenting on our bodies.”

Memories and stories about incidents such as the [infamous Tuskegee Study](#), in which Black men participating in a clinical trial were purposely untreated for syphilis, have given generations of Black people less faith in the field of medicine than other groups.

Convincing Black people to take COVID-19 or HIV inoculations and reaching the end of two pandemics will require a community approach, such requiring Black representation in all aspects of clinical trials and earnest efforts by researchers to educate about the science behind vaccines.

“As we have new therapies and hopefully vaccines, we must ensure that communities that are most impacted actually utilize those tools,” Copeland said.