HIV and Latinos

How common is HIV among Latinos?
The Latino community has been hit hard by the HIV epidemic. Latinos make up approximately 18 percent of the U.S. population, yet they accounted for about 25 percent of all new HIV cases in 2015. Men who have sex with men (MSM) accounted for 85 percent of the estimated HIV diagnoses among Latino men in 2015.

Does HIV affect Latinos differently?
Advances in HIV treatment have benefited people of all racial and ethnic groups. While AIDS deaths have declined overall, the decrease has been more dramatic among non-Hispanic whites than among people of color. While it is not believed that HIV progresses faster or that HIV treatment is less effective in Latinos, it is possible that they receive less adequate health care than non-Hispanic whites. According to the CDC, about half of Latinos diagnosed with HIV are retained in care.

Latinos are also at a higher risk for other health problems, which can make managing HIV infection more difficult. These include:

- Heart health. Heart disease and stroke are the leading causes of death among Latinos in the United States, and Mexican-American men are twice as likely, compared with non-Hispanic whites and blacks, to have high cholesterol. Because antiretrovirals (ARVs), and HIV itself, can also increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, monitoring heart health is an important part of an HIV-positive Latino’s health care.

- Diabetes. Latinos are almost twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to develop this disease, where the body is unable to properly control the amount of sugar in the blood. Left untreated, diabetes can cause damage to the kidneys, eyes, heart and nerves. ARVs have been linked to an increased risk of blood sugar problems, so HIV-positive Latinos may want to address the diabetes risk factors they can control: by exercising, eating healthy and keeping their weight down.
Hepatitis C. Latinos are roughly 25 percent more likely than non-Hispanic whites to suffer from this life-threatening form of liver disease, caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hep C is harder to treat in HIV-positive people and can increase the risk of ARV liver side effects.

Are there any other issues for Latinos living with HIV? Unfortunately, many HIV-positive Latinos are uninsured or underinsured. Immigration status also plays a huge role in health coverage, as both documented and undocumented immigrants are often barred from receiving government benefits like Medicaid. Fortunately, government programs funded through the Ryan White CARE Act, such as the AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP), are available to people regardless of their immigration status. Also, hospitals are not allowed to turn anyone away who requires emergency care.

AIDS service organizations (ASOs) can help Latinos access the health care services they need. HIV-related stigma can often interfere with proper medical care. Know what your rights are if you are denied access to treatment and health care. Language is another barrier to necessary health care. Many HIV-positive Latinos do not speak English fluently. Some clinics and hospitals have Spanish-speaking staff—including doctors, nurses, social workers and translators—to help patients communicate. Don't hesitate to ask for this kind of help.

Last Reviewed: March 19, 2018