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The HIV/AIDS Pandemic Is Still With Us. So Is Progress.



Five Tips for Maintaining Health and Wellness

The first [National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day](#) (NBHAAD) was marked in 1999 as a grassroots-education effort to raise awareness about HIV and AIDS prevention, care, and treatment in communities of color. (CDC)

As the world begins the third year of a global pandemic, it's important to remember — and many of us can never forget — that we are also entering the [fifth decade](#) of living with another global pandemic. Over the decades, HIV/AIDS has killed some [36 million people](#) worldwide, including 700,000 in the United States. We've also seen enormous progress in the treatment, care and prevention of HIV. One of our greatest challenges is to make these advances in care available to all people in all communities. The virus is now, essentially for many people, a manageable chronic illness.

But people can only benefit from the decades of HIV treatment and care advances when they connect to care. This is the most important message I try to convey, day-in and day-

out, decade-in and decade-out, to people living with, or at risk for, HIV, as well as their caregivers — and to community members. These are our bodies and our lives, and we need to have health providers, doctors, nurses, insurance plans and others who partner closely with us, advocate together with us, and deliver the education, resources and support we need to stay well and resilient.

These days, with all the barriers our health care system has in place, for many of us it can be a battle just to navigate, access and stay in the healthcare system. As both the AIDS and COVID pandemics have reminded us, barriers to health care are the greatest for society's most vulnerable, and it is they who suffer the most in public health crises.

During COVID, the elevated risk to communities of color and to older people has been well documented. The HIV pandemic, too, has had a disproportionate impact here. The [Centers for Disease Control \(CDC\) notes](#) that black men who are gay or bisexual are “more affected by HIV than any other groups in the United States,” and, in 2019, accounted for more than one-quarter of new HIV diagnoses. HIV also affects all populations of African American heterosexual women more than women of any other ethnic or racial group. (In the U.S., HIV is also, increasingly, a disease of older people: [more than half](#) of Americans living with diagnosed HIV are age 50+.

The social and economic effects from COVID such as social isolation, loss of jobs, loss of family members and friends, as well as the enormous crystal meth epidemic, have all led to higher risk in sexual behavior. We know from our experience with HIV, that a higher level of risk behavior with sex and increased risk for substance use translate to higher risk for contracting HIV. An increase in behavioral health needs at the community level and barriers in accessing behavioral health support at the community level add to the overwhelming stress that so many community members are experiencing today.

As we mark [National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day](#), at the beginning of [Black History Month](#), here are five things we can do to make sure we capitalize on all the progress that's been made, so we all live longer, healthier lives.

1. **Know your HIV status** — take an HIV self-test. For every 100 people with HIV, only 87 know their status, according to the [CDC](#). For black gay and bisexual men, the number is lower, 83 percent. The CDC recommends self-tests as a way to learn your status when and where it's convenient for you. Visit the [CDC's self-testing website](#) to learn your status, and find out the next steps, no matter the diagnosis.

2. **Be compliant with your medication.** Antiviral therapies are a game-changer in the battle against HIV/AIDS. They are well documented in promoting virologic suppression,

and they are getting more manageable over time. But they only work when you take them! Be open with your concerns about medication and compliance with your healthcare provider. It is not easy to maintain compliance without support.

3. Stay connected to care. This is important for each person, and it's also important for health care systems to remember. All health care is essentially local. If someone cannot get to their clinic or doctor's appointment, they cannot stay connected to care. This has been especially difficult during COVID.

At the not-for-profit [Visiting Nurse Service of New York](#), where I work, health plans such as [SelectHealth](#) a specialized Medicaid plan from VNSNY CHOICE for people living with HIV, individuals of transgender experience, and gender non-confirming or homeless individuals, regardless of HIV status. *SelectHealth* is dedicated to providing high-quality personalized care to people with complex health needs. Our very supportive care managers and clinical staff are there to actively support members in their journey to stay well. I'm proud to share that according to the New York State Department of Health, *SelectHealth* ranks **№1 in NYS across HIV Special Needs Plans** for [clinical quality](#) and [viral load suppression](#).

4. Take advantage of the support, resources, and partnerships out there. One thing's for sure: you are not alone. Community-based organizations like the [Brooklyn Community Pride Center](#), [Griot Circle](#), [SAGE](#), The [Latino Commission on AIDS](#) and [GMHC](#) are accessible and eager to support you.

5. Celebrate your victories. Recognize the hard work and courage it takes to practice self-care, along with everything else you are doing each day, at home, at the office, in the community and supporting your loved ones and families.

If there's one thing pandemics can teach us, it's the preciousness of our life and health and supportive relationships. When you take care of yourself and take the steps necessary to manage your illness and your wellness, living with HIV can mean living life to the fullest.