



The Media Project

A Program of Advocates for Youth

Treating HIV Positive Young People – Is There a Doctor in the House?

DEVELOPMENT

The number of HIV-positive youth is growing at a staggering pace and treating them has its own unique challenges. First, there are few health care professionals with expertise in both HIV and adolescent medicine. Also, beyond the typical adolescent transition, HIV-positive youth are often faced with additional obstacles including financial constraints, concerns about confidentiality, and lack of access and awareness.

WRITING THE WRONGS

- Half of all new HIV infections in the United States happen among people under 25.
- Of sexually experienced teens ages 15 to 17 only 27% have been tested for HIV; only 48% know “for sure” where to get tested.
- One in 7 adolescents do not have medical insurance. Providers can help youth obtain treatment through Ryan White services and Medicaid.
- Many HIV-positive youth deal with lack of basic necessities, such as food, shelter, and transportation.
- HIV-positive youth face psychological worries including fear of being ostracized.
- Many HIV-positive youth struggle with mental illness and substance abuse. These issues strongly affect their ability to cope with their HIV status, especially in adhering to a demanding medical routine.

WRITING THE RIGHTS

- “**Youth-friendly**” health services offer flexible hours, walk-in availability, convenient locations and case managers tailored to young people’s needs.
- Research shows that HIV-positive youth want **one-stop shopping**: a health care facility that offers them HIV-specific care plus primary, mental, and sexual health care and secondary prevention counseling.
- Providers should initiate discussions about **disclosure** of HIV status and partner notification. Peer support groups may help HIV-positive young people explore their options.
- HIV-positive youth need information about how to prevent new sexually transmitted infections as well as re-infection with different strains of HIV. Successful **secondary prevention** programs promote self-esteem, and build communication and social skills.
- Providers should make medical regimens simple and work with the young person to develop an **individualized treatment** plan.

SETTING THE SCENE FOR SERVING HIV-POSITIVE YOUTH

- An HIV-positive teen is kicked out of her/his home after telling her/his parents s/he is HIV-positive.
- A teenager starts an organization to counsel her/his peers about HIV.
- A community group protests to keep open a sexual health clinic for youth.

SOME SCENARIOS ABOUT HIV-POSITIVE YOUTH

“There is no way I’m going to talk to anyone about HIV. What if they tell people about me?”

Providers should assure youth that the information they share is confidential. Research shows that fearing their confidence will be respected is a major deterrent to young people’s seeking health services.

“My patient is only 15 and she’s HIV-positive AND homeless. Where do I start?”

Housing is an essential element in the safety net of HIV-positive youth. They are more likely to follow complex medical regimens and to remain healthy if they have a safe place to live, an address where providers can reach them, and a place to keep medications.

“I’m a sexually active teenager, but I only sleep with clean people. I don’t need to be tested.”

Every hour, two Americans ages 13 to 24 are infected with HIV. Many of them do not know they are infected and many do not know where to go to get tested.

THE WRAP

HIV infection among young people is a challenge for every facet of the treatment process. The most effective ways of serving HIV-positive youth is an integrated plan that assesses and treats his/her medical, mental, and social needs. Providers need to earn the trust of young people, convince them that the medicine can work, and help them gain access to the resources necessary to stay healthy. No single formula can work for every young person, but tailored programs that provide a comfortable atmosphere help health care providers do their jobs and also help young people get the best medical care possible.

REFERENCES & ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Augustine J. *Serving HIV-Positive Youth*. [Issues at a Glance] Washington, DC: Advocates for Youth, 2002. [<http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/publications/iag/hivpositive.htm>]