

Subject Area: Virology

## Battling against the twin pandemic of COVID-19 and HIV infection: World Health Organization

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# Battling against the twin pandemic of COVID-19 and HIV infection: World Health Organization

## Abstract

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection continues to remain one of the most significant public health concerns at the global level. The emergence of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has significantly impacted the access to HIV testing, treatment and care facilities. There has been a gradual decline in the number of newly diagnosed people who are started on ART and some of them have also been forced to discontinue their ongoing treatment. It is the need of the hour to continue the delivery of the essential services and this calls for the need to strengthen primary health care and overall health care delivery system. In conclusion, it is the need of the hour to intensify our efforts and continue our battle against the twin pandemic of HIV and COVID-19 infection. This will essentially depend upon multi-sectoral and multi-faceted efforts and all of us have to work together for prolonged periods of time.

**Keywords:** HIV, COVID-19 pandemic, World Health Organization

## INTRODUCTION

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infection continues to remain one of the most significant public health concerns at the global level. As a matter of fact, the infection has accounted for the deaths of 33 million individuals, while it has been estimated that another 38 million people are infected with the virus by the end of the year 2019.[1] Owing to the concerted efforts of all the stakeholders, including the international welfare agencies, a gradual rise in the access and coverage of HIV-related prevention, diagnosis, treatment services has been reported. It is quite encouraging that more than four-fifth of the HIV positive people were about their infection status and almost 70% of the adults were on antiretroviral therapy (ART).[1]

### HIV and Coronavirus disease-2019

The emergence of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has significantly impacted the access to HIV testing, treatment and care facilities.[2] There has been a gradual decline in the number of newly diagnosed people who are started on ART and some of them have also been forced to discontinue their ongoing treatment.[2] It is the need of the hour to continue the delivery of the essential services and this calls for the need to strengthen primary health care and overall health care delivery system.[1-3] Considering the mode of transmission of COVID-19 infection, it is a must to ensure the safety of the health professionals working for the well-being of HIV infected person and they should be provided with all kinds of personal protective equipment and other essential measures to minimize the risk of acquisition of infection.[2,3]

### HIV Diagnostic and Preventive services

HIV infection can be diagnosed by means of rapid diagnostic tests, that can deliver the test results on the same day.[3] In the recent years, HIV self-testing has also received great acceptance

in heterogeneous settings and has been found to be an extremely effective approach in testing.[1,4] These tests have not only expedited the process of detection of infection, but also ensured linkage with the available therapeutic services.[3]

In the absence of the availability of a curative option and no vaccine, significant impetus has been given towards the strengthening of the prevention services.[3] These strategies include prevention of infection from the mother to child, promotion of use of male and female condoms to minimize the risk of transmission, strategies to reduce the harm to the individuals, promotion of pre-exposure prophylaxis, improvement in the post-exposure prophylaxis, voluntary medical male circumcision and use of antiretroviral drugs.[5]

### Strengthening the delivery of HIV services

We must note that in the year of 2019, a total of 0.69 million people infected with the retrovirus lost their lives due to the lacuna in the services.[1] Amid the recent developments and acknowledging the trends of the disease, it is of prime importance to maintain global solidarity and sustain the delivery of HIV-related all essential services. At the same time, it is our responsibility to safeguard the health and wellbeing of vulnerable population groups (viz. children, adolescents, transgenders, truckers, prisoners, commercial sex workers & their clients, etc.).[2-4]

Realizing the need to improve the service delivery, the outreach workers joined their hands together and worked with dedication during this period of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The result is that the reported disruptions in the services have been reduced by almost 75%, with only 9 nations still reporting disruptions in HIV-related services.[3] It is a welcome fact and clearly shows that different stakeholders together sorted out the problems of shortage of antiviral drugs and even sustained the essential health services.[3,4]

## Lessons from the field

In the sub-Saharan African region, the laboratory facilities (such as infrastructure transport system, manpower, etc.) for detection of HIV, Tuberculosis and COVID-19 infection have been shared. On a similar note, pre-exposure prophylaxis related services have been offered through the online mode in Thailand, while HIV self-testing has delivered encouraging results in an initiative launched in Bulgaria. We all should be strongly motivated and should ensure that we can accelerate our progress and eventually bring about an end to the public health threat posed by HIV infection by the year 2030.[1,3]

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is the need of the hour to intensify our efforts and continue our battle against the twin pandemic of HIV and COVID-19 infection. This will essentially depend upon multi-sectoral and multi-faceted efforts and all of us have to work together for prolonged periods of time.

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