

Study highlights risky behavior, lack of care among HIV-infected crack users

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Doctors who treat HIV-infected crack users refer to them as "the forgotten population." A study being presented at this week's International AIDS Conference in Mexico City reveals that these patients frequently lack outpatient health care, do not receive life-saving antiretroviral therapy and continue to engage in risky sexual behavior that likely contributes to HIV transmission.

Researchers interviewed 190 HIV-infected crack-using patients at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta and Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami over 14 months as part of an NIH/National Institute on Drug Abuse funded study.

One fourth of the group reported having unprotected sex in the last six months, half had not seen an HIV specialist in the last six months, and more than three fourths were not getting antiretroviral therapy, according to the interviews.

The five-year HOPE study (Hospital visit is an Opportunity for Prevention and Engagement) is a collaboration between the NIH funded Center for AIDS Research at Emory University School of Medicine and the NIH funded Developmental Center for AIDS Research at the University of Miami School of Medicine.

"At a time when life-saving medications are available to treat persons living with HIV, there continues to be a population of HIV-positive people who have fallen through the cracks," says Lisa Metsch, PhD,

associate professor of epidemiology and public health at University of Miami School of Medicine. "Frequently, their only contact with the healthcare system is during a hospitalization."

Metsch is director of the University of Miami CFAR's behavior, social sciences and community outreach core and principal investigator for the HOPE study.

Previous studies of crack users in urban hospitals found that their drug use bars them from getting HIV-related care. Drug treatment experts say the short, intense nature of the crack high and lack of a methadone equivalent make crack users a unique group, on top of the chaotic lives they share with other drug users.

In addition, the study's interviews found that, compared with males, female HIV-infected crack users were more likely to report lack of HIV-related care (almost twice as likely) and recent unprotected sex (three times as likely), as well as annual income less than \$5,000 and homelessness.

"We know that not being engaged in care and prevention services is not only bad for the individuals but is also bad for society, in that a substantial fraction of HIV-infected crack users engage in behavior that transmits the virus to others," says Carlos Del Rio, MD, professor of medicine and chief of medical services at Grady Memorial Hospital, co-director of the Emory Center for AIDS Research and co-principal investigator for the HOPE study.

The Emory and University of Miami researchers are testing the effectiveness of an eight-session intervention program that helps participants get into HIV care, teaches them about reducing risky sex practices and helps them into drug treatment if they are ready.

Del Rio says that the findings from this intervention study may be used to establish future interventions targeted to HIV-infected crack users to get them into care, keep them in care and allow them to benefit from care and prevention services available in HIV outpatient clinics.

"Hospitals like Grady and Jackson are doing the best they can in the face of a persistent problem, with limited resources," Del Rio says. "More needs to be done to address substance abuse and mental health in this population."

Source: Emory University

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