

# Patients with severe mental illnesses slip between cracks in HIV testing

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People with bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and major depression with psychosis may be up to 15 more likely than the general population to be HIV positive, but are only marginally more likely to be tested for the virus, according to a study headed by UC San Francisco.

"People with severe [mental illness](#) have higher rates of unsafe behaviors that put them at risk for HIV infection," said first author Christina Mangurian, MD, MAS, of the UCSF Department of Psychiatry. "This includes engaging in unprotected sex with HIV positive partners and partners of unknown HIV status, injecting drugs, using substances in the context of sexual activity and episodes of sexual violence."

The researchers reviewed the medical records of 56,895 California residents who were on one or more anti-psychotic medications for their illnesses, and found that over a one-year period 6.7 percent underwent HIV testing. This compares with the 5.2 percent self-reported HIV-testing rate among California's [general population](#) in 2011.

The participants were aged 18 to 67, with 42 percent over the age of 48, and all were enrolled in Medicaid for the period from Oct. 1, 2010 to Sept. 30, 2011. The study was published in the journal *Psychiatric Services* on Jan. 17, 2017.

## Early Deaths a Reality for Seriously Mentally Ill

"Previous studies have found that people with severe mental illness die up to 25 years earlier than the general population," said Mangurian, associate professor of clinical psychiatry at the UCSF School of Medicine. "Although this is mostly due to cardiovascular disease – related to anti-psychotic medications that increase risk for obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure – HIV and other infectious diseases also contribute to this premature mortality."

Two recent analyses have quantified HIV prevalence among people with severe mental illness as ranging from 1.8 to 6 percent. This is several times higher than the general population in which 1.2 million or approximately 0.4 percent of Americans are HIV positive, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The researchers found disparities in the number of patients undergoing HIV testing, according to age, gender and ethnicity. Some 7.7 percent of women were tested in the one-year duration, versus 5.5 percent of men. Among black participants, 10.8 percent were tested, compared with 6 percent and 2.7 percent of whites and Asian/Pacific Islanders respectively. While 7.9 percent of patients under age 27 were tested, 5.1 percent in the 48-to-67 age bracket were tested.

The researchers also noted that those participants who had received non-psychiatric medical care were twice as likely to undergo testing as those that did not. "This finding supports national efforts to integrate behavioral health and primary care," said senior author James Dilley, MD, from the UCSF Department of Psychiatry and the UCSF Alliance Health Project.

"People with severe mental illness often have low rates of primary care use, but do seek care at community mental health care clinics. As such, we believe this is an excellent opportunity for community psychiatrists to help promote their patients' health by making HIV testing a part of their

care," he said.

## Treatment Compliance Not an Issue

"This is a missed prevention opportunity to detect HIV early in the course of illness," said Mangurian. "Effective treatments are widely available and people with severe mental illness appear to comply with antiretroviral therapies at rates similar to other groups. We believe that annual HIV testing should be strongly considered by public mental health administrators."

The U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, a volunteer panel of national medical experts, recommends annual HIV testing for men who have sex with men and people who are active [injection drug users](#). It recommends testing every three-to-five years for those having [unprotected sex](#) and sex with HIV-positive partners, and for sex workers and injection drug users.

**More information:** Christina Mangurian et al. Low Rates of HIV Testing Among Adults With Severe Mental Illness Receiving Care in Community Mental Health Settings, *Psychiatric Services* (2017). DOI: [10.1176/appi.ps.201600248](https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ps.201600248)

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