

Amid U.S. blood shortage, new pressure to ease donor rules for gay men

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(HealthDay)—A three-month sexual abstinence rule for blood donations

from sexually active gay and bisexual men should be dropped by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, critics urge as the country struggles with a blood shortage.

Right now, based on the slight chance of infection with HIV, men who have sex with men must abstain from sex with other men for 90 days before being eligible to donate blood. It's a rule that's considered discriminatory by advocates and viewed by many in the medical community as an unnecessary roadblock to blood donation, *NBC News* reported.

In April 2020, the FDA decreased the abstinence requirement from 12 months to three months of abstinence, which was done at the urging of lawmakers and advocates as the nation faced a pandemic-caused blood shortage.

The issue was sparked again this week when the Red Cross [announced](#) that skyrocketing COVID-19 cases have caused the "worst blood shortage in more than a decade."

That led to a call from LGBTQ advocates and nearly two dozen members of Congress for the FDA to drop the abstinence requirement.

"Any policy that continues to categorically single out the LGBTQ+ community is discriminatory and wrong. Given advances in blood screening and safety technology, a time-based policy for gay and bisexual men is not scientifically sound, continues to effectively exclude an entire group of people, and does not meet the urgent demands of the moment," 22 senators said in a [letter](#) to U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra and acting commissioner of the FDA Dr. Janet Woodcock.

Richard Benjamin, the former chief medical officer at the American

Red Cross who is now the chief medical officer at the biomedical products company Cerus Corp., argued that based on the science of HIV testing, the three-month waiting period is moot.

"If you are infected with HIV, for the first one to two weeks you will test negative. So, there's a scientific rationale for saying, 'Well, if there's risk, there needs to be a delay,'" Benjamin told *NBC News*. "But it's not three months—it's more like about 10 days."

One LGBTQ advocate says the reluctance to drop the rule is discriminatory.

"This is a crisis of the FDA's own making," Jay Franzone told *NBC News*. "They can change the policy—even temporarily—and they can do so today. The only thing stopping them is bigotry and fear."

This is not the first time the agency has been asked to change the rule: The Red Cross and leading medical groups such as the American Medical Association have previously [urged](#) the FDA to lift the ban on donations on men who have sex with men.

If that happened, there would be a 2% to 4% increase—345,400 to 615,300 more pints of blood—in the nation's annual blood supply, according to the Williams Institute, a think tank at UCLA's School of Law, *NBC News* reported.

Since the start of the pandemic, blood donations are down 10%, according to the Red Cross.

More information: [NBC News Article](#)

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