

HIV treatment has social and socioeconomic benefits, as well as improved health, study finds

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New research shows that HIV treatment for illicit drug users improves their social and socioeconomic wellbeing as well as their health. While the health benefits of antiretroviral therapy (ART) for HIV are well documented, less is known about possible secondary benefits.

Lindsey Richardson, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of British Columbia and research scientist with the BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (BC-CfE), presented findings from two studies July 22 at the International AIDS Society (IAS) Conference in Vancouver. IAS 2015 is the world's largest scientific conference on HIV and AIDS and is organized this year by the IAS in partnership with the UBC Division of AIDS.

In the first study, people starting HIV treatment for the first time were more likely to transition out of homelessness, start addiction treatment, and begin a romantic relationship. A second study found that adherence to ART - meaning an individual is dispensed their HIV medication at least 95 per cent of the time - increases the probability they will transition out of homelessness and end involvement in activities like sex work, drug dealing or street-based income generation.

"These studies find HIV treatment and care may be able to help reduce inequities by promoting improved health, socio-economic stability and improved quality of life," said Richardson. "This research points to how

HIV care and treatment can open doors to improvements in other areas relevant to people's social determinants of health. Both studies reinforce the benefits of early ART initiation and consistent ART treatment, particularly for marginalized and hard-to-reach individuals."

The findings point to additional benefits of HIV treatment that could be further enhanced by housing support, income support and other services. Both studies used data from the AIDS Care Cohort to evaluate Exposure to Survival Services (ACCESS), an ongoing study of approximately 1,000 individuals living with HIV and AIDS in Vancouver who use illicit drugs. The ACCESS study is funded by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH).

"Treatment as Prevention (TasP) - providing full and early access to antiretrovirals to those living with HIV - provides a path to ending AIDS in our lifetime that is founded on firm scientific evidence," said Dr. Julio Montaner, director of the BC-CfE and a professor of Medicine at UBC. "Dr. Richardson's groundbreaking research indicates TasP's open and accessible approach to health care can have significant social and economic implications."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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