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FDA May Update Its Policy on Blood Donations From Gay and Bi Men

Having eased its ban on blood donations from gay and bi men in 2020, the FDA may soon use a questionnaire to assess individual risk.

December 2, 2022 By Trent Straube

More gay and bisexual men may be able to donate blood and plasma in 2023, reports CNN, noting that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has signaled that it may ease its policy on blood donations from men who have sex with men. This population had once been banned from donating blood because of HIV transmission risks—a very real concern in the early days of the HIV epidemic but one no longer justified by science.

Currently, men who have sex with men can donate blood and plasma if they haven't had sex in the previous three months. That policy went into effect in 2020. The previous FDA recommendations required gay and bi men to abstain from sex for 12 months before donating blood, but when COVID-19 struck in 2020 and resulted in a blood shortage, the FDA eased the policy.

In the near future, instead of enforcing another blanket blood ban like the three-month abstinence requirement on all gay and bi men, the FDA may implement a questionnaire that would assess individual risk.

"We anticipate issuing updated draft guidance in the coming months," the FDA said in a statement obtained by CNN. "The FDA remains committed to gathering the scientific data related to alternative donor deferral policies that maintain a high level of blood safety."

The data being gathered includes upcoming findings from the ADVANCE (Assessing Donor Variability and New Concepts in Eligibility) study, which launched in 2020 and concluded enrollment in September 2022. For the study, eight LGBTQ community centers have been working with the FDA and three of the nation's largest blood centers to collect data that, among other uses, could change the eligibility requirements for donating blood and plasma. For more details, see the February 2022 POZ article "Gay and Bi Men Wanted for Blood Donor Study [VIDEO]."

The FDA says the new data "will likely support a policy transition to individual risk-based donor screening questions for reducing the risk of HIV transmission," reports CNN.

According to the Wall Street Journal, an updated policy would likely allow gay and bi men in monogamous relationships to donate blood, while those who had anal sex with a new partner within the three months may not, although the FDA statement did not include specifics.

.@sarahkateellis to @ABC: “As LGBTQ leaders and medical experts have been saying for years: bans and restrictions on blood donations from gay and bisexual men are rooted in stigma, not science.”https://t.co/bfkfE2TziQ

— GLAAD (@glaad) December 1, 2022

In a statement, the American Red Cross said it “is encouraged to learn that the FDA believes data from the ADVANCE Study, along with broader blood donation data, will likely support an MSM [men who have sex with men] policy change.”

The organization added, “The American Red Cross seeks to build an inclusive environment that embraces diversity for all those who engage with our lifesaving mission. As such, the Red Cross believes blood donation eligibility should not be determined by methods that are based upon sexual orientation and is committed to working with partners toward achieving this goal.”

LGBTQ advocacy groups also encouraged the FDA to update its policy.

“While today’s reports of an overdue move from the FDA is an important step, our community and leading medical experts will not stop advocating for the FDA to lift all restrictions against qualified LGBTQ blood donor candidates, said Sarah Kate Ellis, president and CEO of GLAAD, in a statement. “As LGBTQ leaders and medical experts have been saying for years: Bans and restrictions on blood donations from gay and bisexual men are rooted in stigma, not science. Giving one set of rules to some people, and another set of rules to others, based purely on identity, is blatant discrimination. This fight is not over until all LGBTQ Americans who want to donate blood are met with the same protocols as other Americans. All potential blood donors, whose donations could save lives, should be treated equally. There is no excuse for choosing stigma over science in 2022.”

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