TuSalud

Walmart and Amigos United Pharmacies Join Federal “Ready, Set, PrEP” HIV Program

The program allows uninsured clients to fill prescriptions for HIV prevention meds at no cost.

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It just got easier for people without health insurance to access HIV prevention meds. That’s because pharmacies at Walmart stores, Sam’s Clubs and Albertsons Companies—including Amigos United and Safeway—will donate their dispensing services to people in the federal HIV prevention program “Ready, Set, PrEP,” according to an announcement by the Department of Health & Human Services (HHS), which oversees the program. This means the pharmacies will refill participants’ prescriptions for free.

Currently, the Food and Drug administration has approved two forms of pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP: Truvada and Descovy. Both are highly effective regimens of daily tablets and are manufactured by Gilead Sciences. (For more details, see “What’s the Difference Between Truvada and Descovy for PrEP?”)

Walmart stores and Sam’s Clubs operate over 5,000 pharmacies, and Albertsons Companies includes pharmacies in the supermarkets Albertsons, Safeway, Vons, Jewel-Osco, Shaw’s, Acme, Tom Thumb, Randalls, United Supermarkets, Pavilions, Star Market, Haggen, Amigos United, Market Street United and Carrs.

Avita Pharmacy, CVS Health, Health Mart, Rite Aid and Walgreens already participate in “Ready, Set, PrEP.” When combined with pharmacies at Walmart stores and Albertsons Companies, this means nearly half the pharmacies in the United States participate in the program, hopefully increasing access to PrEP.

This good news arrives amid reports that only 891 people had enrolled in the program since it launched last year, despite Gilead’s donation of enough meds for 200,000 people. Advocates suspect that one reason for the low enrollment is that the program doesn’t include the costs of the lab work and clinic visits required to maintain a prescription for PrEP. Another reason is that health care efforts are being devoted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The prevention program is part of a national initiative President Trump launched last year titled

“Ending the HIV Epidemic: A Plan for America.” The initiative’s goal is to lower HIV rates nationwide by 75% in five years and by 90% in 10 years. One way it aims to achieve this is by getting more people at risk for HIV to enroll in a plan that provides PrEP.

The Trump administration undercut these goals last week, however, by announcing a health care rule that allows discrimination against LGBT people, notably the transgender population. The rule states that antidiscrimination rules do not cover gender identity and sex stereotyping. For more details, see “Federal Health Care Rule Tries to Roll Back LGBT Protections.”

Meanwhile, scientists estimate PrEP to be about 99% effective among men who have sex with men and greater than the current 88% to 90% estimate for heterosexual men and women. (For more details, see “How Well Do U=U and PrEP Work? The CDC Updates Its Answers.”)

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