



Emergency Services for Patients Affected by Natural Disasters



Understanding the impact of natural disasters on HIV care

Natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and floods, significantly disrupt healthcare systems and services, posing unique challenges for people living with HIV (PLHIV). These events often lead to the destruction of healthcare facilities, loss of medical records, and interruptions in the supply chain for Antiretroviral Therapy (ART) and other essential medications. Additionally, natural disasters displace communities, making it difficult for PLHIV to access consistent care, attend regular check-ups, or receive vital laboratory testing like viral load monitoring. The stress and harm caused by such emergencies can also weaken immune systems, increasing the vulnerability of PLHIV to opportunistic infections. Furthermore, stigma associated with HIV can exacerbate these challenges, as individuals may feel hesitant to seek care in overcrowded or public emergency shelters due to fear of discrimination or exposure of their HIV status. Understanding these impacts helps healthcare providers and emergency workers develop strategies to mitigate risks, combat stigma, and maintain the continuity of HIV care during crises.

Disaster Preparedness

Addressing Viral Load Maintenance During Emergencies

One significant concern for PLHIV during natural disasters is maintaining an undetectable or low viral load. This can be especially challenging due to stress, treatment interruptions, or lack of access to medications. It would be beneficial to include guidelines on how to reinforce adherence to ART even during displacement or unstable conditions given access to medications doesn't guarantee adherence. This could include strategies such as:



Creating a daily medication reminder system (digital or analog).



Engaging with telehealth services to ensure continuous monitoring.



Educating patients on the potential risks of missed doses on their viral load and health.



Vulnerable population considerations

PLHIV who are children, older adults, pregnant individuals, people with disabilities, men who have sex with men (MSM), women who have sex with women (WSW), or homeless individuals often need extra support during natural disasters because they face greater risks of losing access to medications, medical care, and safe shelter. Practical recommendations include keeping updated medication lists and emergency go-kits, identifying accessible shelters, arranging backup caregivers or transportation, securing power sources for medical devices, and maintaining contact with HIV-informed healthcare providers. Tailored planning—such as prenatal emergency packets for pregnant individuals, child-friendly kits for families, or mobile health outreach for people without stable housing—helps ensure continuity of HIV treatment and overall safety when disasters disrupt normal services.

Emergency Preparedness Simulations and Outreach

To facilitate better preparedness, the healthcare providers can hold community workshops; hands-on emergency simulations, or disaster drills specifically for PLHIV. These activities could help patients and their support networks practice the steps they need to take during emergencies. Additionally, outreach to engage PLHIV prior to a disaster can encourage preparedness and promote education on how best to prepare.



Key steps to prepare

PLHIV should prepare for possible disaster-related displacement to avoid treatment interruptions. Key steps include:



Develop contingency plans for testing and viral load monitoring.



Stockpile essential supplies, including test kits, antiretroviral medications, a first aid kit, a thermometer, and hand sanitizer.



Pack an emergency kit with at least a 30-day supply of HIV medications, medical records, and provider contacts.

- Keep at least a 30-day supply of ART if possible.
- Keep at least a 30-day supply of Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP). PrEP is a highly effective preventative treatment for individuals at high risk of acquiring HIV. By taking PrEP as prescribed, individuals can reduce their risk of HIV transmission by up to 99%. People who benefit from PrEP include those with HIV-positive partners, individuals with multiple sexual partners, and people who inject drugs. Maintaining access to PrEP during emergencies, such as natural disasters, is crucial to ensuring its efficacy and protecting individuals who rely on it.
- Store medication in a waterproof, portable container, along with a written record of the prescription.
- Write down medication list, dosage, and provider contact information.
- Keep a copy of insurance card and identification.



Pack condoms and other prevention methods. Condoms are highly effective in preventing HIV transmission and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Be sure to include enough to last at least 30 days. Include additional prevention supplies: If possible, pack items such as lubricant to ensure safer practices during sexual activity and reduce the risk of condom breakage.



Plan by identifying alternate care options, clinics, and pharmacies near the potential evacuation locations.



Stay connected with healthcare providers and support networks. Check to see if they offer virtual services.



Use a patient portal if available. Online patient portals can store medication lists, recent lab results, and tools to contact providers or change pharmacies. Having digital access to this data ensures preparedness in case physical documents are lost. If you don't use a portal, keep this information in your emergency kit.

Accessing care during a natural disaster

It is critical that PLHIV are able to continue medications and receive care during a natural disaster. Here are some considerations for continuity of care during a natural disaster:



Many pharmacies can transfer prescriptions; check to see if the local pharmacy can transfer prescriptions to the relocation site.



Check for local health departments mobile units or “pop up” locations.



Seek out community resources to support transportation, housing, and other supports during the natural disaster.



Mental Health and Coping Mechanisms

Mental health challenges during and after natural disasters can exacerbate health issues, including ART adherence. Health care providers should take steps to:

- ✓ Recognize signs of acute stress or depression.
- ✓ Provide access to mental health resources such as online counseling or community groups.
- ✓ Offer tips for managing stress to maintain medication adherence and overall well-being.

By addressing SUD alongside mental health concerns, individuals can be better supported in managing both conditions and achieving holistic well-being.

Substance Use Disorder (SUD) Support

SUD can significantly impact mental health and medication adherence, particularly during and after stressful events like natural disasters. It is essential to provide targeted support for individuals struggling with SUD, including:

- ✓ Recognizing the signs of substance misuse and understanding its relationship with stress and adverse experiences.
- ✓ Accessing lifesaving treatment such as medication for opioid use disorder (MOUD).
- ✓ Connecting with support networks, such as peer support groups or helplines that specialize in SUD.
- ✓ Strategies for coping with cravings and triggers in a healthy, sustainable way.

Even in the chaos of a natural disaster, taking quick action to stay in touch with providers and pharmacies can keep treatment on track. With the right support, people can maintain their health and stability through any emergency.



Recovering from a natural disaster

Recovery after a natural disaster does not happen overnight, especially if there is lots of damage. After the immediate danger has passed, PLHIV should re-establish routines, reconnect with care providers, and address the emotional and practical impacts of the natural disaster.



Contact HIV provider and resume regular appointments.



Update HIV providers on any missed doses, lost medications, or changes in living situation.



Replace any lost medical records\documents.



Start to rebuild your natural disaster preparedness plan.



Reconnect with friends, family, and other community organizations for social support.

With the right support and a renewed plan, it's possible to rebuild health, stability, and sense of control after a disaster. Recovery takes time, but reconnecting with care and support can help regain stability and move forward with confidence.

Closing

By supporting preparedness, facilitating access to care during emergencies, and guiding patients through recovery, health care professionals play a critical role in protecting continuity of treatment for PLHIV. A coordinated, patient-directed approach helps ensure that individuals remain engaged in care and maintain their health, even in the face of significant disruption.

Disclaimer

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RESOURCES



Immediate Local Assistance

- [211 Services](#) – Local Housing, Food, Medical, and Transportation Support
- [Free & Low-Cost Clinics \(NAFCC\)](#) – Find Nearby Clinics



HIV-Specific Medical Care– Find a Provider

- Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program [Provider Locator](#)
- [American Academy of HIV Medicine](#) (if displaced outside the U.S.)
- [Indian Health Services National HIV/AIDS Program](#)



Medication Assistance

- [AIDS Drug Assistance Programs \(ADAP\) Directory](#)
- [ASPR Emergency Prescription Assistance Program \(EPAP\)](#)



Housing Support

- [FEMA Individuals and Households Program](#)
- [Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS \(HOPWA\)](#)



Mental Health & Emotional Support

- [SAMHSA](#) Disaster Distress Helpline – Call/text 1-800-985-5990 (press 2 for Spanish)
- [LGBT National Help Center](#) – Online Peer Support Chat
- [National AIDS Hotline](#) (referral service)
 - English: 1-800-342-2437
 - Spanish: 1-800-344-7432



Transportation Assistance

- [Ryan White HIV/AIDS Program](#) – Medical Transportation Services (availability varies)



Disaster Preparedness & Safety

- [CDC Emergency Preparedness & Response](#)
- [Ready.gov](#) – Emergency Planning Tools
- [State Homeland Security & Emergency Services](#)
- [FDA Emergency Preparedness](#) – Medications



Provider-Focused Disaster Guidance

- [HIV.gov Clinical Info](#) – Disaster Guidance
- [Getting Displaced With HIV](#) Fact Sheet
- [HIV.gov – Emergencies and Disasters and HIV](#)