

# Swapping stigma for strength--with national HIV/AIDS testing day on June 27, find out how walgreens makes our patients with HIV/AIDS feel safe, comfortable and respected

## News

Marcel Naddaf has had neighbors tell him about their cancer diagnosis, friends talk about high blood pressure meds and family members discuss what happened during recent surgery. But no one has ever started up a conversation with him about having HIV. “About AIDS”, says the St. Louis market pharmacy director, “there has only been silence”. That silence can come from the stigma that also keeps individuals from getting tested, taking the appropriate medications and finding the support needed to live longer, healthier lives. More than 30 years after the first case of HIV/AIDS was reported, many still find it difficult to talk about a disease that today is both preventable and treatable. Early diagnosis and treatment can give individuals with HIV the same life-expectancy as the general population. Yet, one in five Americans living with HIV does not know they have the disease. Breaking the silence by finding ways to educate people about the disease is one tactic Walgreens has been using. “From the onset of the epidemic, Walgreens has not been quiet about its commitment to help stop the spread of HIV and treat those with the condition”, says Glen Pietrandoni, senior director of virology in Pharmacy, Health and Wellness. “We’ve been working to help people understand the significance of testing and medication adherence and compliance”. That work recently earned Walgreens the Heroes in the Struggle Corporate Award from the Black AIDS Institute, which cited our more than 700 HIV-specialized pharmacies, our participation in HIV testing initiatives and our support of the organization Greater than AIDS. “We’re pleased that we can give our corporate presence to the fight against AIDS”, says Pietrandoni. “It supports the work our pharmacy team members do in local communities, on a patient-by-patient basis every day. They help patients manage HIV, and create safe places for them to ask questions and learn how to live well with the disease”.

Volume 1 Issue 1 - 2015

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**Received:** June 22, 2015 | **Published:** June 24, 2015

## The trust factor

Some patients with HIV fear that others might find out they have the disease, so our pharmacy team members have to balance educating these patients with respecting their privacy. Making literature about HIV/AIDS openly available in our stores and distributing it in targeted communities gets it into people’s hands without them having to ask for it (Figure 1). “By going out into their communities, our pharmacy team members give people opportunities to ask questions about HIV/AIDS in an environment that’s non-threatening”, says Rob Braley, New Orleans market pharmacy director. “It shows we’re comfortable and knowledgeable about HIV/AIDS, and there’s a place to go when they’re ready for more information”. Naddaf, who serves as a board member for St. Louis Efforts for AIDS, says a simple act, like having OTC HIV testing kits available, provides a way for people to self-educate and learn their HIV status. It also keeps health concerns private, as does informing patients with HIV that their medications can be mailed to their home, or any location they choose.



**Figure 1** St. Louis pharmacists Andre Harvey (left) and Joseph Williams lead by example, showing customers it’s safe, quick and easy to get tested at Walgreens during last year’s National HIV Testing Day in June.

## The power of training

Because research indicates that adherence to treatment for HIV is higher in patients who use HIV-specialized pharmacies, Walgreens offers many HIV/AIDS resources for pharmacists who want to learn more. Pharmacists can access the information at StoreNet > Rx > Patient Care > HIV/AIDS. “We want every pharmacist who wants to have the knowledge needed to better serve patients with HIV to be able to access it”, says Pietrandoni. “When patients with HIV-or any illness or condition- come into our stores, they want to be treated with respect, fairness and good customer service”.

## The ‘Purple Pill’ goes OTC

Improved access to Nexium is welcomed news for the more than 60 million Americans suffering from frequent heartburn. The No. 1 prescribed heartburn relief brand in the U.S., commonly known as the “Purple Pill,” went OTC in May. Patients can now purchase the 20 mg strength in our stores and on Walgreens.com. Nexium 40 mg will still be available only with a prescription. “Whenever there’s a switch from prescription to OTC, there are opportunities for pharmacists to be more consultative”, says Brian Arnold, director of pharmacy store operations in Store Operations and Community Management. “We can help patients understand distinctions between the two Nexium strengths, and depending on the symptoms a patient presents, we can recommend an OTC treatment like Nexium 20mg or suggest being seen by a practitioner for further evaluation if symptoms are persistent or more serious in nature”. As customers and patients come to our stores with questions about Nexium, pharmacists can use these interactions to share information about the role of diet and lifestyle in relieving heartburn. Limiting alcohol, reducing meal sizes and losing weight have been known to alleviate the discomfort. For patients whose symptoms need further evaluation, our Healthcare Clinic locations are available, or patients can be referred to their primary care physician. “Our pharmacists are trained across a multitude of disease states, accessible – in some locations 24 hours a day—and for no charge”, says Arnold. “These are facts we want to become common knowledge in the communities we serve”.

## Keeping medications affordable

Depending on a patient’s prescription plan, Nexium 20mg may drop from some PBM-preferred drug lists in the future. In those cases, pharmacists will have greater opportunities to showcase their value by collaborating with physicians and payers to identify affordable options. “Our No. 1 goal is to provide patients with the medications they need to be well”, says Arnold. “The switch to OTC empowers patients to play a greater role in their healthcare. With pharmacists practicing at the top of their license, we help patients choose Walgreens when making decisions about living a happy, healthy life”.

## Did you know?

When Nexium went OTC in May, Walgreens scanned the very first unit in the nation- and we’ve been exceeding our sales goals to date. According to the supplier, Pfizer, we’ve had “best in class” planning and execution on this launch. A special thanks to the Houston, Carolinas, Dallas and Tennessee markets, which led in sales for the first week that Nexium was available OTC.

## Easy on the eyes (Figure 2)

Soaking up the sun and diving into the pool are anticipated

summertime pleasures. But for the 30 million people in the U.S. who wear contact lenses, these activities can sometimes lead to eye infections if contacts aren’t properly cleaned and regularly replaced.



Figure 2 Easy on the eyes.

So, PRN caught up with Colleen Shaughnessy, nurse practitioner at 811 Madison St. in Oak Park, Ill., for some tips on keeping eyes healthy:

- a. **Take out contacts before getting in a swimming pool:** Hot tub or any body of water. Chlorine or tiny debris in the water can irritate and infect the eyes. Walgreens has many owned brand solutions that can help customers keep their eyes healthy. Try Well at Walgreens brand Sterile Soothing Eye Wash Eye Irrigating Solution to remove foreign material, and relieve irritation and discomfort.
- b. **Wear goggles:** If contacts need to be worn while swimming. After swimming, clean, rinse and disinfect contacts using Well at Walgreens brand Sterile Hydrogen Peroxide Cleaning and Disinfecting Lens Care System.
- c. **Drink water:** Both you and your eyes need to stay hydrated on hot summer days. Should dry eyes become a concern, Well at Walgreens brand Eye Itch Relief Drops can be used to supplement natural tears.
- d. **Use daily disposable lenses when camping** or away from ample supplies of clean water. Remember to keep hands as clean as possible when putting contacts in, and discard a lens that drops on the ground.
- e. **Protect children’s eyes with a pair of sunglasses** and make sure they have an eye exam before pre-school. Our Healthcare Clinic locations offer basic eye tests as part of school physicals, and also treat pink eye and styes.
- f. **Stay healthy:** A balanced diet, exercise and not smoking all help promote eye health. Regular physical exams can detect early signs of diabetes or other systemic conditions that can lead to eye problems. If your eyes bother you, have them checked out immediately by an optometrist.
- g. **Purchase contacts on Walgreens.com:** One of our fastest growing categories online, we carry millions of boxes of contact lenses, including those with UV and UVB protection. We

verify all prescriptions with patients' prescribers and standard shipping is free on all orders. Contact lens purchases are also eligible for reimbursement from Flexible Spending and Health Savings Accounts, and team members can take advantage of their employee discount as well.

## Acknowledgements

None.

## Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.