



PATIENT NAVIGATION

What is patient navigation?

Patient navigators are people who guide patients through and around barriers in healthcare systems that can prevent them from accessing or receiving treatment. People who often experience challenges when accessing healthcare, such as gay men, other men who have sex with men, and transgender individuals (collectively, GMT), can benefit greatly from this service.

Patient navigation is:

- ▶ A service that assists patients in navigating complex healthcare systems to help them meet their basic and specialized healthcare needs.
- ▶ Available in a variety of settings, as trained patient navigators can work in clinics, hospitals, HIV testing and antiretroviral treatment distribution centers, and social service agencies, among other sites.
- ▶ Helpful in linking GMT and other at-risk populations, such as young people, sex workers, and people living with HIV, to discrimination-free healthcare.

Why is patient navigation important?

Patient navigation is very important, especially for chronic infections like HIV and the key populations most affected by it—including GMT individuals. Often, GMT individuals do not seek HIV services because they have experienced stigma and discrimination in healthcare settings or know someone who has. In addition, GMT individuals living with HIV often have co-infections or other health conditions that can make it difficult to remember all their medical needs, such as making appointments or taking multiple medications. Plus, healthcare facilities are often complicated, and it is not always easy to know where or whom to go to for specific services.

Patient navigators are familiar with the healthcare facilities in their communities and know which health providers are GMT-friendly, and they can assist patients who have previously avoided health settings in finding care that meets their needs. They also can and should advocate on behalf of GMT individuals regarding the need for policies and training that help facilitate discrimination-free care.

Patient navigators not only facilitate improved healthcare access and quality for underserved populations through advocacy and care coordination, but also help GMT individuals address their deep-rooted distrust of providers and the health system.¹ Peer navigation in the U.S. has also been associated with a small but statistically significant decrease in HIV viral loads, demonstrating its effectiveness in improving health outcomes.²

What responsibilities does a patient navigator have?

A patient navigator's job is varied and complex, and the responsibilities often depend on the patient, the healthcare system, and/or a variety of other factors, such as healthcare center policies. However, some universal responsibilities include:

- ▶ Coordinating appointments with providers to ensure timely delivery of diagnostic and treatment services
- ▶ Maintaining good communication and trust with patients, their families, and healthcare providers
- ▶ Monitoring patient satisfaction with the care experience
- ▶ Ensuring linkages to follow-up services.

Linking patient navigation to peer education programs

Existing peer educator programs provide an optimal opportunity for training patient navigators. Instead of training volunteers to be peer educators only, these programs can also include a component on peer navigation in their curriculum.

The trained peer educators/navigators can then educate GMT individuals about how to prevent HIV infection and help individuals diagnosed with HIV learn about health systems, so they can access and remain in care. This new navigation strategy should be a part of any prevention program targeting HIV-positive individuals.

Training manuals for patient navigator programs can be found [here](#) and [here](#). There are emerging and convincing data that show that peer navigation can improve retention in the continuum of HIV care, especially for sexual minorities and racial or ethnic minority populations, by enrolling individuals newly diagnosed with HIV in care and bringing people who stopped accessing services back into care.^{3,4}

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- 1 Natale-Perreira A, Enard K, Nevarez L, Jones L. The Role of Patient Navigators in Eliminating Health Disparities. *Cancer*. 2011;117(15):3543-3552.
 - 2 Bradford JB, Coleman S, Cunningham W. [HIV System Navigation: An Emerging Model to Improve HIV Care Access](#). *AIDS Patient Care and STDs*. 2007. 21(s1), s49-s58.
 - 3 Tobias CR, Cunningham W, Cabral HD, Cunningham CO, Eldred L, Naar-King S, Bradford J, Sohler NL, Wong MD, Drainoni M. Living with HIV But Without Medical Care: Barriers to Engagement. *AIDS Patient Care and STDs*. 2007. 21(6): 426-434.
 - 4 CDC. [National HIV Prevention Progress Report](#). 2013.