Investing in HIV and Cancer Treatments Fuels the Economy With Trillions of Dollars

Scientific breakthroughs in HIV, heart disease, breast cancer and obesity extended lifespans and generated $167.5 trillion over 30 years.

May 19, 2026 By Eva Lorenz

Investing in medical research is worthwhile—it not only saves lives but also makes a ton of money. That's the bottom line according to a new report from the United States Chamber of Commerce for which University of Chicago researchers evaluated the societal and economic impact of medical innovation in four major disease areas: HIV, heart disease, breast cancer and obesity. Their analysis found that a $0.6 trillion increase in healthcare spending generated $167.5 trillion in value over three decades, averaging $5.6 trillion annually and representing a 27-to-1 return on investment.

"This study illuminates the profound human impact of medical innovation—transforming once-fatal diagnoses into manageable conditions and giving patients decades of life they wouldn't have had otherwise," said Neil Bradley, executive vice president and chief policy officer at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. "These breakthroughs represent hope for millions of families and have fueled economic growth by keeping Americans healthier."

The study estimated the dollar value of health improvements due to medical innovation at an individual and population level. Health gains were measured in terms of life expectancy based on mortality data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and financial gains were measured using the Value of a Statistical Life Year, or the value of extending an average person's life by one year based on various U.S. government data.

Innovations in HIV testing, treatment and prevention generated $22 trillion in health gains in 30 years and an additional 40 years of life expectancy. In 1996, highly active antiretroviral therapy combinations changed the HIV epidemic, allowing people with the virus to live increasingly longer lives. According to the HIV.gov timeline, 1996 was also the first year during which AIDS was not the leading cause of death for all Americans ages 25 to 45.

HIV is now a treatable chronic condition, and antiretroviral therapies help people living with HIV achieve viral suppression. People with HIV who achieve and maintain viral suppression experience slower disease progression, enjoy better overall health and are less likely to develop opportunistic illnesses. What's more, people with an undetectable viral load don't transmit HIV to others through sex. This is known as treatment as prevention, or Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

Breast cancer is the most common cancer diagnosed among women in the United States, according to the American Cancer Society, and the chance of an American woman dying of breast cancer has fallen by about 44% since 1989. Like HIV innovations, breakthroughs in breast cancer treatment changed the prognosis for many people with the malignancy and generated financial gains for the country. Chamber of Commerce analyses showed that breast cancer treatment generated $25 trillion in health gains over the last 30 years—roughly equal to the entire annual output of the U.S. economy.

Obesity affects 42% of Americans, but obesity treatments, including GLP-1 receptor agonists, such as Ozempic and Wegovy, are projected to increase lifespans and improve quality of life. These treatments are also expected to generate $94.4 trillion in health value. Heart disease treatments generated $13.7 trillion in health value by preventing heart attacks and extending survival.

Medical innovation not only confers benefits to the individuals in the form of healthier, longer lives, but it also benefits the public, building larger and more productive workforces. Medical advancements in HIV, breast cancer, and heart disease treatments fueled work productivity gains worth $1.94, $1.21 and $1.11 trillion, respectively. Obesity advancements are expected to lead to $6.48 trillion in gains.

Overall, the benefits of innovations concerning these four disease areas represent a 27-fold return on investment.

"Even accounting for the $878 billion net increase in healthcare spending these innovations required over 30 years (driven primarily by HIV and breast cancer treatments, while heart disease and obesity innovations actually saved money), the return is extraordinary," wrote the report's authors. "For every dollar we've invested in treating these conditions, we've generated dollars in health value, productivity and tax revenue that will compound for decades to come."

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