

Thirty Years Later

What You Should Know about HIV and AIDS

Once thought of as a disease from the 80s, the upward trend of HIV incidence rates has brought the spotlight back on HIV and AIDS.

HIV infection is the presence of human immunodeficiency virus in a patient regardless of the stage of disease. AIDS is an advanced form of HIV infection based on certain criteria. HIV is transmitted in three main ways: sexual contact; transmission through blood; and, transmission from pregnant mother to child. Prevention of transmission can be achieved by consistent use of condoms for sexual intercourse, abstinence or delaying intercourse for young people, sex education on Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and HIV prevention, and clean needle programs for injection drug users.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), approximately 1.1 million people in the US are living with HIV infection, and almost one in five (21%) are unaware of their infection. Currently in Arizona there are 14,265 people living with HIV/AIDS, including approximately 190 cases of HIV positive patients in Cochise County. The incidence of newly diagnosed HIV infections is increasing, and the reasons for this are being explored. The CDC also states, unless improved education and prevention is achieved, that number will surely rise. The CDC now recommends everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 be screened at least once. However, this is not a uniform practice, as of yet. Education on both sides of the doctor-patient partnership and overcoming social barriers are the keys.

Many people assume that HIV infection will not affect them. A survey of US high school students revealed that 33% have had sexual intercourse, and 39% of these didn't use condoms. More alarming is that 15% of all high school students had already had more than 4 sexual partners. The use of drugs and alcohol is also linked to high risk behaviors that can lead to HIV exposure. High risk populations are those who have had multiple sexual partners, persons who are injection drug users - past or present, or men who have sex with men (MSM). All pregnant women are screened for HIV in their prenatal labs and if she is found to have HIV, treatment with medication during the pregnancy can prevent infection of the baby.

HIV infection does not necessarily mean that a diagnosis of AIDS is inevitable. With proper treatment early on, the virus can be suppressed and immune function restored making a very long, healthy life easily attainable. In addition, not all patients with HIV infection require medications right away.

Ask your doctor for an HIV test. It is a simple blood test and results are available in a few days. Most county health departments are also offering the rapid tests, which are complete in 15-20 minutes.

The most important step you can take is to get screened at least once, and more often if you have had multiple sexual partners or use injectable drugs. Even people who are in a steady relationship should be screened routinely. The idea that "it won't happen to me" is a very risky fantasy. Educate yourself and loved ones about HIV testing and prevention, regular condom use, and screening.

For appointment with your provider, please call CQMA Bisbee at 520-432-2042, CQMA Palominas at 520-366-0300, CQMA Douglas at 520-364-7659, or call the Cochise County Health Department.



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