

Early Diagnosis Crucial

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Dec. 1 was World AIDS Day. The theme this year was "Take the Test. Take Control." The observance should make all of us think and re-examine the changing face of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Today approximately 1.2 million people in the United States are living with HIV/AIDS, with an additional 40,000 infected every year. One-quarter to one-third of those infected have no idea that they carry the virus that causes AIDS. That one fact alone has done more than any other factor to keep the disease alive.

Despite all the public attention given to HIV at home and abroad, the number of new infections continues to grow. As infection rates climb and the number of persons unaware of their HIV status increases, our efforts to increase the survival rate will have little effect. Early detection is the key to survival.

The variety of symptoms first named Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome by researchers a quarter of a century ago was a mysterious illness implicated in some 200 deaths in the United States. Today AIDS has caused more than a half-million deaths here and another 25 million around the world.

For more than a decade after it was first identified, we had no effective treatment for AIDS, or for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Then, in the mid 1990s, we began developing a series of drugs that -- while not able to cure the disease -- helped delay the time in which HIV starts destroying the patient's immune system before reaching the AIDS stage.

Today, HIV/AIDS has migrated from a handful of cities on the east and west coasts to cities, towns, and rural areas in every corner of the country. The South has now emerged as a new focal point for the disease. Interestingly, Montgomery County has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS of any county in the state.

The faces of people contracting the disease have changed, too. They include ever greater numbers of young people, women, and minorities. Today about 70 percent of new HIV infections occur among African Americans and Latinos. While black teenagers make up only about 15 percent of the U.S. teen population, beginning in 2004 they accounted for nearly three-fourths of new AIDS cases in their age group.

Failure to detect HIV early has several critical drawbacks. One of the most significant is the unfortunate fact that patients whose immune systems are damaged by the time they become aware of their HIV infection die sooner. Even with all of the advances in drug therapies, fewer than half survive for even eight years.

However, more than three-quarter of those who seek testing and treatment early -- while they are still fairly healthy -- survive and go on to live nearly normal lives.

Another rationale in favor of early diagnosis is the prophylactic effect. Dr. Julie Gerberding, the director of the Centers for Disease Control, says people who don't know their HIV status are responsible for 50 percent to 70 percent of all new infections, principally through unprotected sex.

If they knew, she says, they would take steps to protect themselves and their partners. High-risk behavior decreases by more than half when people are aware of their own infection.

These were the reasons the CDC shifted course last year in hopes of reducing the infection rate in this country. Recognizing that testing recommendations developed 20 years ago were no longer appropriate, the CDC issued new guidelines, recommending that HIV tests become a voluntary -- but routine -- part of regular medical care.

Today, anyone who visits a doctor's office or other medical facility should be tested for the HIV virus, just as they have been tested for other conditions such as high blood pressure in the past. Anyone can decline the test, but unless they say no, the test should be a standard part of their medical care.

Getting tested for HIV is the single best action each of us can take to control the spread of the disease in this country. Testing today is quicker, more accurate, and more reliable. If detected early, HIV can be treated like other chronic diseases. This means that people with HIV can expect to live a normal lifespan, just as they can while living with other chronic diseases.

People die every day from HIV/AIDS because they received a late diagnosis. The best thing we can do for them -- and ourselves -- is to increase prevention and early detection through HIV/AIDS testing. Get tested!

To find an HIV testing site center near you, visit HIVtest.org or text your zip code to "KNOW IT" or "566948" on your cell phone.

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