

AIDS: Prevention key tactic

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Today, Dec. 1, marks the 20th anniversary of World AIDS Day. Since its inception in 1988, the world community continues to examine efforts made and propose new directions to stop the AIDS pandemic.

New estimates from the Aug. 6 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* show that more Americans are being infected with HIV now than before. The number of new HIV cases has increased from an annual estimate of 40,000 in previous years to 56,300 in 2006.

According to data from the Center for Health Statistics at the Alabama Department of Public Health, 900 new HIV/AIDS cases were reported in Alabama in 2007, compared to 934 in 2006. A similar trend was observed for Montgomery County, which remains the county with the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS in the state.

Such slight declines are good news. However, we can not celebrate until we observe a sustained reduction in HIV incidence. Since these figures are based on reported cases, the magnitude of the HIV/AIDS infection can be higher than current data indicate.

Overall, racial ethnic differences persist. Blacks represent the largest number of HIV/AIDS cases in the state, accounting for nearly 7 of 10 cases reported every year in the last three years. Nonetheless, according to some health professionals, racial differences in HIV/AIDS statistics may reflect differences in testing; apparently black patients are more likely to be tested for HIV than white patients.

Still, AIDS remains one of the main challenges for our communities, our state, our nation and our world. No one is immune. HIV infection occurs at all ages, for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation.

In recent years, the number of persons infected with HIV through heterosexual contact has risen, especially among women and adolescent females.

As a response, several racial and ethnic groups have launched campaigns to prevent the spread of HIV among their people. Feb. 7 is the National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day; March 10 is the National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day; March 20 is the National Native (American Indian, Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian) HIV/AIDS Awareness Day; May 19 is the National Asian and Pacific Islander HIV/AIDS Awareness Day; June 8 is the Caribbean American HIV/AIDS Awareness Day; and Oct. 15 is the National Latino AIDS Awareness Day.

We hope that by focusing on specific racial and ethnic groups and by designing group specific programs, more people will be reached and the spread of HIV in our communities will be reduced. We challenge you to find and use resources available in your community and your county to educate yourself and others about HIV/AIDS prevention, testing and treatment.

Prevention is still the best weapon against HIV/AIDS. Various local agencies and health providers will help you learn about ways to prevent HIV infection. Those in the Montgomery and Dothan areas can contact Montgomery AIDS Outreach at 334-280-3349 (Montgomery) and 334-673-

0494 (Dothan). Residents of Birmingham and surrounding areas can contact Birmingham AIDS Outreach at 205-322-4197.

Help is available. Call the Alabama Department of Public Health's HIV/AIDS Division at 1-800-228-0469 for HIV/AIDS information and resources available in your area. Take time to learn about HIV/AIDS and get tested.

Visit AIDS.gov, MySpace or Facebook to obtain great information on HIV prevention, testing, and treatment. Take a quiz at AVERT.org and see how much you know or don't know about HIV/AIDS. Watch the HIV 101 video on youtube.com.

The United States is a leader in HIV/AIDS education, prevention and research. But more is still needed to stop this deadly disease at home and abroad. This year, take an HIV/AIDS challenge.

Join the millions of people working to stop HIV/AIDS by making your own HIV/AIDS pledge today. Visit <http://www.worldaidscampaign.org> to make your "Stop AIDS Leadership Pledge." Share it with a friend.

There are other things you can do to help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Tell your friends and loved ones about HIV, direct them to various sources of information on the Web and challenge them to share that information with others. Protect yourself and behave responsibly; avoid putting yourself and others at risk of HIV infection. Use technology to share HIV/AIDS information through text messaging, e-mails, instant messaging systems and blogs.

Until a cure is found, prevention remains the best tool to combat HIV/AIDS. Be informed, share knowledge and help. Pledge to stop HIV/AIDS on this year's World AIDS Day.

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