

# AIDS What Do We Know?

by Sonja Ungemach



**A**IDS. At the alarming rate of 1500 new cases a month in the United States, it has swiftly become the most talked about issue among physicians, public health officials, politicians, researchers, and sexually active people of all persuasions. There are already over 35,000 diagnosed cases of AIDS in the United States, 171 in Oregon, 10 of those in Lane County. One new case is diagnosed each week in Oregon.

Along with the justifiable alarm come some misconceptions and confusion about the disease and how it is passed along. Some of the confusion may stem from the recent acceleration in AIDS research, with new reports hitting the press almost daily. As we are constantly updating and adding to the current body of knowledge about AIDS, it may seem that little is really known for sure. However, there are some facts about AIDS and some guidelines for preventing it which are generally accepted as true.

AIDS, or acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, refers to the very serious, life-threatening illness resulting from failure of the immune system. Persons with AIDS are susceptible to infections which they cannot fight off, such as pneumonia, and to a rare form of cancer called Kaposi's sarcoma. Most cases of AIDS are fatal.

ARC, or AIDS-related complex, is a milder form of illness which may or may not develop into AIDS. Symptoms are similar to those of the flu—fatigue, weight loss, fevers, swollen lymph nodes, diarrhea—only they last longer. Anywhere from 25 to 100 percent of ARC patients will get AIDS.

In both AIDS and ARC, the virus which infects the immune system is known as human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV. Many people testing positive for HIV have no AIDS or ARC

symptoms at all. However, experts are currently predicting that over 50 percent of persons exposed to HIV will develop AIDS. Symptoms do not usually appear for at least two to three years after infection, and some have gone for seven to eight years with no signs of illness.

## Who Gets AIDS?

The virus, HIV, is spread by sexual contact and by exposure to infectious blood. Therefore, *anyone* who has unprotected sex with an infected person stands a very good chance of being infected.

At highest risk are homosexual and bisexual men, intravenous drug users who share needles,

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prostitutes (or anyone who has many sex partners), hemophiliacs, and the sexual partners of high risk or infected persons. Also at high risk are the unborn babies and infants of infected mothers.

While 91 percent of the 35,000 cases of AIDS in the United States are homosexual males or IV drug users, the number of heterosexual transmission is on the rise. Many are the heterosexual partners of IV drug users; 75 percent are either black or Hispanic, living in large cities where IV drug use is a major problem and public education is ineffective or does not exist.

Heterosexual transmissions currently represent four percent of the total, or about 1400 cases. The Center for Disease Control predicts 27,000 heterosexual cases of AIDS by 1991—or 10 percent of the predicted 270,000 cases.

The CDC also estimates that over 1.5 million Americans now carry the AIDS virus, many without knowing it. While they may never exhibit symptoms themselves, they can pass it along to others. About 90 percent of infected persons are men between the ages of 20 and 50, or one out of 30 men in that age group.

## Safe Sex

There is no cure for AIDS or ARC. The only way to prevent this disease is to avoid exposure to the virus which causes it. Exposure can be minimized by using condoms, by limiting sex to one uninfected partner, or by abstaining from sex altogether.

AIDS counselors also recommend being selective when choosing a sexual partner, asking that person about his or her sexual and drug use history. Counselors admit that interviewing a prospective lover is awkward, impractical, and not at all what we're used to, but consider the risk! "When you have sex with someone, you're having sex with everyone they had sex with for the past seven to 10 years," says Jim Shoemaker, an AIDS counselor at White Bird Medical Clinic.

The incidence of new cases among male homosexuals has been leveling off, indicating that public education and safe sex practices are making a difference.

While it is clear that HIV is present in the saliva of people with AIDS, there is no evidence, to date, that saliva is a means of transmitting

the disease. Some sources say kissing, in the absence of open sores or cuts, is probably OK. If the virus were swallowed, it would probably be dissolved by acids in the digestive system. Other sources say open mouthed, intimate kissing should be avoided.

The AIDS virus is fragile and does not survive for long outside the human body. There is no evidence that it is passed through casual contact, coughing or sneezing. Objects touched by infected persons are not contaminated, with the exception of objects which might be contaminated with fresh blood, like razors or toothbrushes.

## To Test or Not to Test

There is no laboratory test for AIDS, nor is there a test for the HIV virus itself. However, there is a test, called the HIV antibody test, which determines whether or not a person's immune system has developed antibodies to fight against the virus. The presence of these antibodies *probably* indicates the presence of HIV. The presence of HIV *probably* means you are infectious and can pass the virus to others.

Anyone who tests positive for the antibodies undergoes a series of additional tests to determine if the individual is indeed infected. The false positive rate is something like 50 percent for low risk individuals, meaning your test could tell you that you have the virus when you don't. The false negative rate, however, is very low; if you test negative, you're probably OK.

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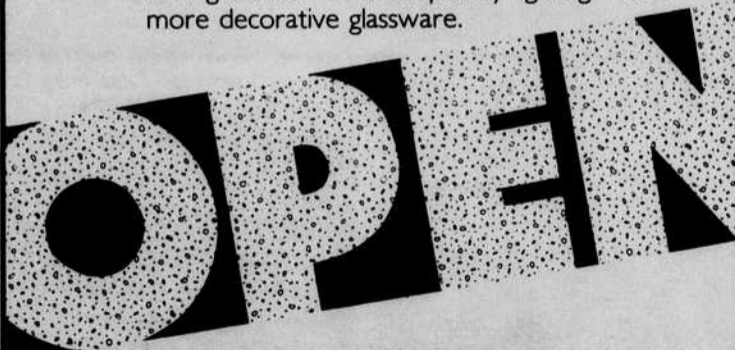
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