

AIDS: The Risk for Heterosexuals

In Haiti and central Africa, where AIDS has been present for a longer period of time than in the U.S., the primary mode of AIDS virus transmission is through heterosexual contact. This strongly suggests that heterosexuals in this country will be at increasing risk over the next several years. Already, the number of heterosexual AIDS cases is increasing at a faster rate in this country than the overall number of cases.

The magnitude of the AIDS epidemic through heterosexual transmission could be staggering. Consider that an estimated 2 million Americans are already infected and are probably infectious to their sexual partners. Consider that the incubation period for AIDS lasts up to 5 years or longer, during which an apparently healthy but infected individual can sexually transmit the AIDS virus.

Sexually transmitted diseases, of course, are not a new concern for heterosexuals. Some, such as Gonorrhea and Chlamydia, can cause complications, but are treatable. Others, such as Herpes, are not curable, but usually cause only relatively minor problems. The incurable and lethal AIDS virus, however, adds a new dimension to the concern about STDs. Clearly, for heterosexuals, the AIDS epidemic will have a profound impact on decision making about sexual activity and personal intimacy.

How AIDS is NOT TRANSMITTED

There is no evidence that people who are infected with the AIDS virus may spread the infection by casual ordinary contact as occurs on a university campus. The use of classrooms, study areas, libraries, physical education facilities, dining facilities, and other public areas will not cause AIDS transmission. There

certainly is no reason to exclude people with AIDS or "carriers" from social, cultural, or academic activities on campus.

Specifically, AIDS is not contacted through shaking hands, hugging, cheek kissing, living with a carrier, touching a carrier, sneezing or coughing. One does not obtain AIDS from toilet seats, door knobs, eating utensils, plates, glasses, clothing, books, furniture, wash basins, showers, swimming pools or hot tubs. There is no evidence that insects transmit AIDS.

Saliva, tears and urine may contain the virus in infected persons, but these body fluids have not been directly implicated in transmission of the infection.

How AIDS is Transmitted

Transmission of AIDS can occur through sexual contact, exposure to infected blood, and passage of the virus from a woman to her newborn infant. Blood and semen are known to be infectious. Vaginal secretions of infected females are known to contain the virus and may account for transmission.

Prevention

Sexual contact is the major means by which the AIDS virus is transmitted. The Oregon State Health Division recommends all persons who have been sexually active with more than one partner and those whose partners have been sexually active with other persons should use condoms when engaging in sexual activity, irrespective of whether the recipients position is oral, vaginal, or anal. Sexual practices that lead to trauma and bleeding, such as rectal intercourse, are discouraged.

Blood contact through needle sharing is the second most common means by which infected persons contracted the virus. Individuals should not share any sharp or abrading objects, including toothbrushes, tattoo instruments, razors or ear piercing instruments.