

Former tennis star says he has AIDS virus

□ Arthur Ashe says he got AIDS from a blood transfusion during surgery

NEW YORK (AP) — Arthur Ashe, the first black man to win one of tennis' Grand Slam tournaments, said Wednesday he had AIDS. Ashe said he contracted it from a blood transfusion during heart-bypass surgery.

Ashe, 48, said he tested positive for HIV three years ago when he underwent brain surgery but decided to announce it now after a newspaper received a tip about his condition. There also had been rumors for some time that he had the condition.

The virus has since turned into full-blown AIDS, Ashe said.

"I'm not HIV positive. I have AIDS," Ashe said.

Ashe said to have come forward earlier with the news could have hurt him and his family.

"It put me in the unenviable position to have to lie to maintain my privacy. ... It is only that I fall under the dubious umbrella of public figure," he said.

"I didn't commit any crime. I am not running for public office," he said. "I should reserve the right to keep something like that private."

At a midtown news conference attended by his wife, Jeanne, physicians and New York Mayor David Dinkins, Ashe opened by joking that he had turned down an offer to manage the New York Yankees.

But after starting to read a prepared statement, Ashe broke down and had to be assisted with the presentation by his wife.

After regaining his composure, Ashe said he was healthy and his family had shown no signs of the virus.

"I am not sick. I can function very well. And I plan to continue doing those things that I have done all along, if the public will let me," Ashe said. "My wife and daughter are in good health and both are HIV negative."

Ashe also said he had taken strength from another sports star — basketball great Magic Johnson, who announced last November that he had tested positive for the AIDS virus.

"I have also gained much insight as I've watched Earvin Johnson weave his magic among schoolchildren," he said.

Like Johnson, Ashe said he would work with AIDS groups.

"I think we have a tremendous opportunity to educate the public ... and hopefully bring a heightened sense of urgency to the subject," he said.

Ashe said he was "100 percent sure" that he had contracted the virus from a blood transfusion, probably at his second heart operation — a double bypass in 1983, after his second heart attack.

"I was 18 months too soon for HIV testing of blood supplies," he said. Since 1985, all blood supplies have been screened for the AIDS virus.

Both the bypass surgery and the quadruple bypass in 1979 were performed at

'Having been an athlete, I had the discipline to adjust quickly to the new reality.'

— Arthur Ashe

St. Luke's Hospital in New York. Ashe said he did not plan to file suit.

Ashe said he had received "a very nice phone call" from President George Bush and planned to become involved with the Presidential Commission on AIDS "at some stage."

Ashe also talked with Virginia Gov. L. Douglas Wilder, a childhood friend from Richmond.

In 1988, Ashe said, he went to doctors after "my right hand went dead. I could not use it at all. There was a brain scan and it was not good."

Surgery was done, and a biopsy revealed toxoplasmosis, which Ashe said was a marker for AIDS.

"I have known since my brain operation in 1988 that I have the virus," he said. "Any admission of HIV infection at that time would have seriously and permanently ... infringed upon our family's right to privacy."

Ashe said he had accepted the diagnosis and was undergoing treatment with the anti-AIDS drug AZT.

"Having been an athlete, I had the discipline to adjust quickly to the new reali-

ty. I was very fortunate to tolerate AZT," he said.

Ashe said friends, family and associates who knew about his condition had kept a "silent and generous conspiracy to maintain my privacy."

But last week, he said, a call to *USA Today* by an unidentified person changed all that.

"Sometime last week someone phoned *USA Today* and informed the paper," he said.

In response to questions, Ashe said he was not angry at the paper but was upset that he found himself in a position of having to reveal his secret.

"Someone just called and ratted on me and (*USA Today*) felt journalistically they had to follow it up," he said.


Some 4,770 AIDS cases in the United States have been attributed to blood transfusions, about 2 percent of the total. Almost all those infections occurred before the nation's blood supply began being screened for the HIV virus in 1985.

Ashe helped get South Africa banned from the Davis Cup because of the nation's apartheid policies in March 1970. Ashe said African-American athletes should use their sports success to promote civil rights causes and took a leading role, addressing the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

Ashe scored his greatest triumph in 1975 when he changed his game and defeated the seemingly invincible Jimmy Connors to capture Wimbledon.

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Doctor uncertain how Ashe picked up AIDS

HACKENSACK, N.J. (AP) — The doctor who performed the heart surgery in which Arthur Ashe believes he got the AIDS virus said Wednesday he doesn't know how the former tennis star got the disease.

Dr. John E. Hutchinson said he had not reviewed the medical records from Ashe's heart bypass surgeries in 1979 and 1983 at St. Luke's Hospital in New York City and was not sure whether blood or blood products were used in either surgery. He said only the hospital could answer that.

A spokesperson from St. Luke's Hospital did not immediately return a telephone call left Wednesday evening by The Associated Press.

Speaking at a news conference in New York, Ashe said he was "100 percent sure" that he had contracted the virus from a blood transfusion, probably at his second heart operation in 1983.

Hutchinson, director of cardiac surgery at Hackensack Medical Center since 1985, held the same post at St. Luke's when Ashe had his surgeries.

"In Mr. Ashe's situation, it is possible he received blood or blood products," Hutchinson said. "In all probability, assuming he did, just because someone has cardiac surgery doesn't mean that's how he acquired this."

Hutchinson said nobody thought to screen blood for AIDS in 1979 because the virus was unknown. He said it was a minimal concern in 1983 and

only since 1985 has blood been screened for the AIDS virus.

Hutchinson said he has had two patients contract the AIDS virus in his 20 years as a cardiac surgeon. He did not state how they acquired the virus.

Dr. Peter Gross, head of department of medicine and infectious diseases at Hackensack Medical Center, said his colleague could not be blamed.

"I don't think the cardiac surgeon would be to blame then or now," Gross said.

Hutchinson said he had heard rumors that Ashe had the virus but nothing official until Ashe's announcement Wednesday that he has AIDS.

Ashe had a double bypass in 1983 and a quadruple bypass in 1979. Both surgeries were necessary, Hutchinson said.

"Specifically, as I recall, I think with his anatomy, the chances of living 12 years probably would have been extremely low had he not had the surgical intervention he had," Hutchinson said.

Hutchinson tracked Ashe's progress for a year or two after the second operation but said Ashe's cardiologist has monitored him since.

"I think like many people in America, I admired Mr. Ashe immensely for his accomplishments in sports," Hutchinson said. "I thought he was a gentleman and the type of person I'd like to see win. I was proud to see him win and proud for what I had done for him as a surgeon."

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