

AIDS and African American Women

~By Dr. David Pryor

African American communities are being ravaged and attacked by an epidemic of AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). At issue is our lifestyle. Although a number of AIDS cases can be attributed to Injection Drug Use (IDU), too many of us – whether gay, straight, male or female – continue to have unprotected sex with multiple partners or people we barely know.

The AIDS rate among Black women is three times as high as that among Latino women and 18 times as high as that among White women. Today Black women make up more than half of all women who have died of AIDS.

African Americans make up 13 percent of the population, yet we now account for 41 percent of all AIDS cases in the United States. The Harvard AIDS Institute estimates that by the year 2010 more than half of all our country's AIDS cases will be within the African American community

What is HIV?

HIV is the abbreviation for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is the virus (infection) that causes AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), a disease that can destroy one's life. Human immunodeficiency virus infection occurs when infected cells in blood, semen, or other body fluids are spread from one person to another.

HIV infection attacks and breaks down the body's immune system which normally produces white blood cells and antibodies that fight against viruses and bacteria. The infection-fighting cells are called CD4+T-cell lymphocytes. When

ger able to effectively protect the body against diseases. The infected person is more open or susceptible to illnesses that usually do not affect healthy persons.

Dr. David Satcher, the Surgeon General of the United States, states that there are 33.4 million HIV-infected people around the world, and 665,000 in the United States. It is estimated that 50 percent of all new HIV infections in the United States are among people under 25, the majority of these young people are infected sexually. Nearly half (44 percent) of the HIV-infections in the age group 13 to 24 were reported among young females and over half (63 percent) were among African Americans. It is important to remember that HIV can be present in the body for up to twelve years without producing any outward signs of illness. The infected person is no longer able to effectively protect the body against diseases. The infected person is more open or susceptible to illnesses that usually do not affect healthy persons.

How Can You Become Infected?

Women, because of the structure of the female genital tract, run a higher risk of contracting the AIDS virus from a man than men do from women. That's why the disease is increasingly transmitted through heterosexual activity and is claiming the lives of African American women at such an alarming rate. Common ways of acquiring HIV infection are:

Having unprotected (without a condom) sex with someone who has HIV.

Sharing needles and/or syringes used in IDU (injection drug use). A pregnant woman with HIV can give it to her baby during childbirth or while breastfeeding (this does not always happen, however).

Blood transfusions. Since 1985, however, people have seldom received HIV from an infusion of blood or blood-products because better safeguards are practiced against such occurrences.

What is AIDS?

AIDS is a late stage of HIV infection, and is present when the body becomes overpowered by one or more opportunistic infections. These opportunistic infections ultimately cause death because the body cannot defend itself against them.

Also, if a person's CD4+T-cell count drops below 200, he or she is considered to have AIDS. A healthy person usually has from 800 to 1,200 CD4+T cells.

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