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AIDS

AND THE HEALTHCARE WORKER

Fifth Edition
October 1987

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QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What is AIDS?

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, or AIDS, is a condition which weakens the body's immune system and lowers its resistance to infection. People with AIDS are vulnerable to a wide range of life threatening illnesses, including Kaposi's sarcoma (KS), a rare form of cancer, and *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP), an uncommon lung infection.

What is ARC?

ARC stands for "AIDS Related Complex". ARC refers to a variety of conditions caused by infection with the AIDS virus. Conditions range from mild symptoms to life-threatening ones.

What causes AIDS/ARC?

AIDS/ARC is caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus or HIV (formerly called Human T-lymphotropic Virus Type III or HTLV-III).

How is AIDS/ARC spread?

It's hard to come in direct contact with the AIDS virus, which is spread only through body fluids (primarily blood and semen). The virus can be passed from an infected individual (male or female) to another person (male or female) through sexual contact or sharing contaminated needles. An infected pregnant woman can pass the virus to her fetus. To avoid exposure to the AIDS virus, public health officials urge that people use condoms and don't share needles or syringes.

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How is AIDS/ARC diagnosed?

There is no test for AIDS/ARC, but doctors diagnose AIDS/ARC with a physical exam, which includes blood tests.

One blood test—the HIV antibody test—shows only whether the person has the AIDS virus antibody. A positive test means only that a person has been exposed to the AIDS virus, but does not indicate if that person might develop AIDS or ARC.

What are the AIDS Statistics?

So far, more than 40,000 AIDS cases have been reported in the United States. Experts believe that between 1 and 1.5 million Americans have been infected with the AIDS virus. They predict that by 1992 there will be 270,000 cases in the U.S., including 179,000 deaths. While most people with AIDS in the United States are gay and bisexual men or intravenous drug users, most African AIDS cases occur among heterosexuals. Therefore, risk of exposure to the AIDS virus is not restricted to any particular group. (In 1987 there are as many cases of AIDS among heterosexuals in the United States as there were in the gay community in 1983).

In the United States, 92% of people with AIDS are male. Twenty three percent of these men are black and 14% are hispanic. Of the 8% who are female, 51% are black and 21% are hispanic. It is imperative for health care workers to be sensitive to the incidence of AIDS in minorities and women so that more timely—and better—health care can be provided.

What about reports of healthcare workers getting AIDS?

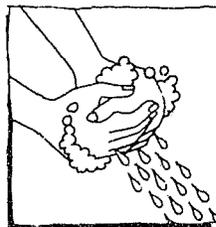
As of June 1987, studies have been conducted on over 1,100 healthcare workers exposed to the AIDS virus via injuries, cuts with sharp instruments, or exposure through mucous membranes. Of these, nine workers who denied other risk factors apparently contracted the virus via occupational exposure. Four of these cases followed needlestick exposures to blood from patients infected with HIV. Two other cases occurred after extensive contact with blood and body fluids when recommended precautions were not routinely observed. The other three workers were infected with the AIDS virus via exposure through chapped, abraded skin or mucous membranes to blood or body fluids.

Skin and mucous membrane exposures to the AIDS virus are thought to occur much more commonly than needlesticks, but the risk associated with skin or mucous membrane exposures is likely to be far lower than that associated with needlestick injuries. Nonetheless, the increasing prevalence of HIV infection increases the potential for such exposures, especially when universal blood-borne disease precautions are not followed. Hence these cases emphasize the need to strictly follow the guidelines when you anticipate contact with blood and body fluids, even if your skin seems perfectly intact.

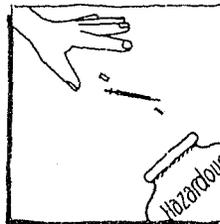
UNIVERSAL PRECAUTIONS FOR HEALTHCARE WORKERS:

The U.S. Public Health Service Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends that healthcare workers consistently use blood and body fluid precautions for *all* patients to minimize the risk of transmission of HIV and other bloodborne infectious diseases. These universal precautions are:

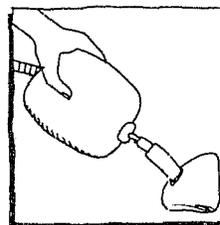
ALWAYS



Wash hands before and after patient contact. If skin contact with blood or body fluids occurs, wash immediately and thoroughly.



Dispose of Needles properly by placing them in a puncture-resistant plastic container used only for this purpose. NEVER resheath or recap needles before throwing them away, as this is a major cause of puncture injury.



Keep an Ambubag at bedside for the resuscitation of an AIDS patient. Require the hospital to furnish an ambubag in the patient's room.

AS NEEDED

Gloves should be worn when you anticipate contact with blood or body fluids, as when handling stool specimens or cleaning up stool or urine.

Gowns should be used when splashing of blood or body fluids is likely.

Masks and eye-coverings are necessary when the patient has a lung infection such as tuberculosis and is actively coughing, or during medical procedures that produce aerosols or involve more extensive contact with blood or body fluids.

Waste material should be handled and disposed of in accordance with hospital procedures for controlling the spread of all blood-borne infectious diseases.

NONE NEEDED

No dietary precautions are needed, since there is no evidence that AIDS can be spread through food, dishes or utensils.

No universal precautions are needed unless contact with blood or body fluids is anticipated. Taking unnecessary precautions makes it harder for patients to cope with their illness physically and emotionally.

Healthcare Worker

Training. The CDC recommends that employers provide the necessary equipment and supplies and ongoing AIDS education to all healthcare workers to minimize the risk of infection with HIV and other bloodborne diseases.

Special precautions for pregnant women

Many AIDS patients excrete cytomegalovirus (CMV). Since this virus can cause birth defects, it may be advisable for pregnant women to be excused from the direct care of any known CMV excretor.

The Patient's Right to Privacy

Information regarding every patient's diagnosis, sexual orientation, and general medical condition is confidential. Because people with AIDS face discrimination in housing, employment, and provision of services, maintaining confidentiality is vitally important.

To help ensure confidentiality, infection control precautions should be indicated only by general labels (for example, "Blood/Secretion Precautions") posted on charts and doors.

The patient alone must determine who will have specific information about his or her condition.

Co-Workers with AIDS

Since AIDS is not spread through the normal, casual contact that occurs in the workplace, you are not at risk by working alongside a person with AIDS/ARC.

Workers with AIDS have a lot to offer both professionally and personally. Co-workers, in turn, can be an important source of support for them.

More AIDS information

is available through local AIDS agencies, public health departments, or similar organizations in cities across the country. In addition, the Service Employees International Union has a more detailed booklet, *The AIDS Book: Information for Workers*, which is available from your local SEIU representative.

Call the national toll-free hotline:

Public Health Service

National AIDS Hotline

(24 hours, 7 days a week)

1-800-342-AIDS

1-800-342-7514

This brochure is produced by the Occupational Health and Safety Department, Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, 1313 L Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005, (202) 898-3386 with the assistance of the AIDS Education Committee of SEIU Local 250, Hospital and Institutional Workers Union, 240 Golden Gate Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94102, (415) 441-2500.

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