

AIDS infection back at '80s level

Rate rising fastest among black men

By Elianna Marziani
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Young homosexual and bisexual men are transmitting HIV at rates that health officials likened to the first years after AIDS was discovered, with the annual infection rate among blacks of that group reaching 14.7 percent.

"When AIDS was first identified in 1981, the nation could not have foreseen the enormous toll the disease would have in the coming 20 years," said Dr. Helene Gayle, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention.

Overall, 4.4 percent of men aged 23 to 29 who have sex with other men became infected with HIV every year during a three-year study, according to a report released yesterday by the CDC. Two-and-a-half percent of white homosexual and bisexual men contract the virus annually, compared to 3.5 percent of Hispanics and 14.7 percent of blacks.

CDC epidemiologist Linda Valleroy told reporters that these infection rates resembled the figures for the years when AIDS first spread rapidly among urban homosexuals.

"The numbers we're publishing right now are more like the findings you see in the '80s than the findings you see in the '90s," she said.

Dr. Gayle said the number was so high among blacks — almost six times higher than for whites — because for a long time blacks did not perceive HIV as a risk to them.

"There was a long-standing feeling that HIV was not a problem for communities of color," she said. "People thought of it as a white gay disease and not as a disease that was going to impact the African-American community."

AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is the disease caused by HIV (the human immunodeficiency virus). HIV destroys cells from the body's immune system, making the person less able to fight infections. Treatments have

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been found that alleviate symptoms and delay the progression of HIV to AIDS, but none have been found that can permanently prevent HIV from developing into AIDS.

In the United States, AIDS has infected more than 1 million people and killed approximately 450,000 since it was discovered in 1981.

Though the numbers of AIDS cases and deaths have been decreasing since the mid-1990s, the rate of decline has slowed over the past few years. About 40,000 new infections occur in the United States each year, a figure the CDC hopes to cut in half over the next five years. The CDC estimates that one-third of those infected are unaware.

Seventy percent of new HIV infections each year occur among men, according to the CDC.

Among the newly infected men, 25 percent got the virus from inject-

ing drugs using needles. The other 75 percent were sexually transmitted; 42 percent among homosexual and bisexual men, 33 percent in heterosexual men.

The study, conducted by Miss Valleroy, sampled men aged 15 to 29 who have sex with other men.

The first phase of the study was conducted from 1994 to 1998 and involved about 3,500 homosexual and bisexual men aged 15 to 22 in Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, San Francisco and Seattle. It studied both HIV's incidence, defined as the number of new infections annually, and its prevalence, the total number of infected people.

In the sample groups, HIV incidence was 2.6 percent overall, with 2.4 percent of whites, 1.8 percent of Hispanics, 4 percent of blacks and 5.4 percent of those of mixed ethnicity studied contracting the virus annually. Incidence was more than twice as great for those aged 20 to 22 than for those aged 15 to 19, with a margin of 3.5 percent to 1.6 per-

cent.

HIV prevalence was 7.2 percent overall, with 3.3 percent of whites, 6.9 percent of Hispanics and 14.1 percent of blacks studied carrying the virus.

The second phase of the study was conducted from 1998 to 2000 and involved an older group of about 3,000 homosexual and bisexual men, ages 23 to 29, in the same cities. Both incidence and prevalence were higher in this older age group.

In addition to the incidence figures among that older group, the study gave the figures for HIV prevalence as 7 percent among whites, 14 percent among Hispanics and 32 percent among blacks studied.

The CDC warned that the data from these studies might not reflect the nation as a whole, since the sample size was small and may have overrepresented high-risk homosexuals due to its finding its participants in homosexual bars, clubs and organizations, and urban areas

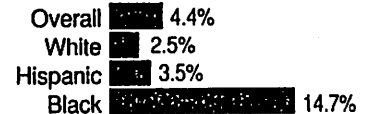
INFECTION RATES

HIV incidence, or number of new infections annually, among men who have sex with men, ages 15-22 in Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, Miami, New York, San Francisco and Seattle, 1994-1998:



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

HIV incidence among men who have sex with men, ages 23-29 in the same seven cities, 1998-2000:



The Washington Times

with a large homosexual population. It said that regardless, the high rate of incidence in the sample cities is of "critical public health importance."

Dr. Gayle said that the high rate of incidence among homosexual men is a result of having unprotected sex with multiple sexual partners. Abstinence or a monogamous

relationship with an uninfected person is the only certain way to avoid transmission of HIV.

"We owe it to the people reflecting on the epidemic 20 years from now — whose lives will be greatly affected by decisions made today — to invest ourselves in the one known cure for AIDS: not becoming infected in the first place," she said.