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HIV infections soar among gays

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New cases of HIV, which causes AIDS, jumped sharply among homosexual men in the United States from 1999 to 2002, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported yesterday.

The number of new infections climbed 17 percent for homosexual men in this period, compared with 7.3 percent for all men, the study revealed. It was published in the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

"Reports of syphilis outbreaks and increased unprotected sex raise concerns regarding increases in HIV transmission among men who have sex with men," the authors of the report said. HIV is the acronym for human immunodeficiency virus.

In a telephone interview yesterday, Dr. Rob Janssen, director of the CDC's AIDS division, said black men continue to account for more than half (55 percent) of new HIV diagnoses in the country, making them the hardest-hit population.

HIV cases increased 26 percent and 8 percent, respectively, among Hispanic men and non-Hispanic white men during the survey period.

In all racial categories, the greatest number of men being diagnosed with HIV were homosexual or bisexual, Dr. Janssen said. Researchers say their data were based on 102,590 new HIV diagnoses in 29 states in the survey period. Of those, 43,144 were among homosexual and bisexual men. The other infections, including heterosexual men, were mostly transmitted through intravenous drug use. The rates of infection for both the groups remained steady during the period.

Growing numbers of homosexual men appear to be ignoring "safe sex" warnings and putting themselves at risk for HIV and sexually transmitted diseases. One reason, Dr. Janssen said, is the erroneous belief that AIDS is "curable." The other is that HIV/AIDS is viewed as a chronic, not terminal, disorder, which can be managed with a variety of drug cocktails.

However, he said, not everyone will respond to HIV/AIDS treatments, and prevention is the best course. Exacerbating the problem, he said, is the failure of many people to know their HIV status. "We estimate that some 250,000 of the 900,000 Americans believed to be positive for HIV do not know they are infected."

CDC researchers say their analysis did not include some states having the highest prevalence of exposure to HIV or infection with other sexually transmitted diseases through homosexual or bisexual contact. Such jurisdictions include New York, California, Illinois and the District. The omissions -- owing to the recent switch from counting only full-blown AIDS

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cases to including HIV cases -- make the findings even more worrisome, investigators say.

The HIV findings follow the release of other data in recent days from the CDC and the National Center for Health Statistics, which showed that the rate of primary and secondary syphilis increased 9.1 percent last year.

The rise in syphilis cases last year is the second consecutive annual increase. The CDC attributed the rise to more syphilis cases among men, especially homosexual and bisexual men.

The HIV surveillance data from the 29 states support 25-state results released in July at the National HIV/STD Conference in Atlanta.

In July, the CDC reported that AIDS-related deaths fell 5.9 percent last year, but overall AIDS diagnoses rose 2.2 percent. The earlier results showed that HIV cases among men having sexual relations with men rose 7.1 percent from 2001 to 2002.

"These findings add to the growing concern that we are facing a potential resurgence of HIV among gay and bisexual men," Dr. Harold Jaffe, director of the CDC's National Center for HIV, STD and TB Prevention, said at the conference in Atlanta.

Dr. Janssen said the study "reinforces the concerns" raised by Dr. Jaffe, who has researched AIDS at the CDC since the center began tracking the disease.

Initially, AIDS primarily was a disease affecting homosexual men. Their share of the epidemic began to wane by the early to mid-1990s, as many homosexual men turned away from unsafe sexual practices.

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