

Teens with AIDS virus take more risks than counterparts a decade ago, study says

By Jamie Talan
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Teens infected with the human immunodeficiency virus are engaging in risky sexual behavior twice as often as young people did before the availability of drug treatments that postpone the onset of AIDS, a new study has found.

Today's HIV-infected teens are also twice as likely to abuse drugs and alcohol as their counterparts a decade ago, the study found.

"Despite the drug treatments, kids today are doing worse," said Marguerita Lightfoot, a research psychologist at the University of California-Los Angeles' David Geffen School of Medicine who conducted the study.

The study is published in the March-April issue of the American Journal of Health Behavior.

"Young people think they are invulnerable," said Dr. Robert Klitzman, co-director of the Center for Bioethics at Columbia University, who has spent two decades studying HIV behavior. "Young people think that HIV is no big deal. They haven't had the experience of watching their peers get sick and die."

Highly active antiretroviral therapies were introduced in 1996. The drugs have successfully lowered virus levels and prolonged lives, but their availability has given patients more opportunities to transmit the virus to others, Lightfoot said.

"Evidence suggests that many people living with HIV believe that sexual behaviors that could lead to the transmission of HIV, like unprotected sex, are less risky" if viral levels are low, she said.

One-third of the young people in the survey lived in New York. The rest were in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Miami.

Only half the teenagers were taking the drug treatment "cocktail," which Bruce Schackman of Weill Cornell Medical College's department of public health said has been simplified in recent years. His group has been designing behavioral interventions to prevent HIV infection. "These results are very important," he said. "These problems have to be taken very seriously."

The constant medical care patients receive while on the highly active antiretroviral therapies provides a good opportunity to provide counseling, he said.

The study began in 1994, when Lightfoot and her colleagues tracked high-risk behavior in 351 young people, ages 13 to 24, two years before the antiretroviral therapies became available. The next survey was conducted in 1999-2000, when researchers interviewed another 175 teenagers and compared the level of high-risk drug, alcohol and sexual activity.

The 1999 group had been infected a year longer than those in the earlier groups, a finding that Lightfoot said suggests that people are becoming infected earlier. "Today's teenagers reported feeling more emotionally distressed and felt they had a poorer quality of life than young people interviewed more than a decade ago," she said.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimate that 36,299 adolescents and young adults in the United States have been lost to the AIDS epidemic through 2002.

In that year, teenagers ac-

counted for 11 percent of newly diagnosed HIV cases. The majority are Hispanic or black.

"The message just isn't getting through," Lightfoot said.

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