

## HEALTH

## Most AIDS victims know they have it

By Daniel Q. Haney  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

TORONTO — A surprisingly high two-thirds of all Americans who are infected with the AIDS virus already know it, health officials reported Sunday.

Researchers from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention based in Atlanta estimate that about 775,000 Americans carry HIV, and at least 500,000 have been tested and know their status.

The CDC research is the first careful attempt to arrive at this figure using infection data collected by the states. Until now, many experts had guessed that about half of all HIV-infected Americans were aware of it.

"This is encouraging, because it suggests that the majority of persons with HIV have been tested," said Dr. Patricia Sweeney, who directed the study. "We need to continue to work to ensure these people have access to recommended treatment."

Some experts are pushing for more widespread AIDS testing now that treatments exist that can delay and perhaps stop HIV's destruction of the immune sys-

tem. Doctors believe that the sooner treatment starts, the better the chance of controlling the disease.

The new data suggest the problem of undiagnosed infections may be smaller than previously believed. Nevertheless, they also mean that roughly 275,000 Americans are unaware of their HIV infections and are not getting early treatment.

Sweeney presented her findings at an infectious disease conference sponsored by the American Society for Microbiology. Another CDC study presented last week demonstrates the importance of the new treatments for prolonging lives.

Sweeney's figures were based on the cases of infection reported to the CDC through June from 25 states where doctors are required to report the names of patients who carry the virus.

In these states, 240,000 people were known to be living with AIDS, and another 76,000 were infected but not sick. The researchers used these data to estimate the number of diagnosed infections in the states without

mandatory reporting of HIV infections.

The researchers say their two-thirds estimate is conservative, since it does not include people who learned of their HIV status through anonymous testing. Among those whose infections are known to authorities, 80 percent were diagnosed in hospitals, doctors offices and clinics.

"We need to continue to stress the need for early testing to maximize the potential benefits of new therapies to extend people's lives," Sweeney said.

Nationally, AIDS deaths fell 23 percent last year. Combinations of AIDS drugs that include a new class of medicines called protease inhibitors are generally credited with this turnaround. However, until now, this belief was based more on anecdotes than on hard data.

Dr. Scott Holmberg analyzed the records of 2,957 AIDS patients who were seen in 10 HIV clinics. He linked their death rates with their use of combination therapy.

The first weak protease inhibitor became available in late 1995, and two stronger ones that are now mainstays of treatment

arrived in the spring of 1996.

Through 1995, the death rate among these patients averaged 7 percent every three months. By the third quarter of 1996 this had fallen to 3 percent, and in the final quarter of last year it was just 2 percent. Those who survived were also healthier.

Every three months in 1995, 18 percent of AIDS patients fell sick with infections that are common complications in this disease. By the end of last year, just 3 percent got these infections.

The declining toll of AIDS among these patients was matched by their increasing use of combination therapy, including combinations of AIDS drugs that were available before the advent of protease inhibitors.

During the first quarter of 1994, 15 percent took combinations. This increased to 29 percent in the first three months of 1995 and 87 percent in the first quarter of 1996. By the end of last year, 92 percent of AIDS patients were getting the combination treatment.

"This is an important step in winning the war against AIDS," Holmberg said.

## Protease inhibitors work, but do not cure

By Amy Beth Graves  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

COLUMBUS, Ohio — The killer in Michael McDonald's body is silent.

The AIDS-infected man has lived with the deadly HIV virus for 12 years. A year ago his viral load, the measure of HIV in the blood, was more than 1 million. Today, it's undetectable.

The reason is simple: McDonald is one of 150,000 people taking a powerful cocktail of AIDS drugs called protease inhibitors.

Brought back from the brink of death, McDonald, 38, is planning for a future he never thought he would have. Dreams of going to medical school are real again and his living will is tucked away in a drawer.

There's only one problem — the cocktail is not a cure. The virus still lurks in his body. AIDS advocates are alarmed by what they say is a growing public belief that the treatment cures AIDS.

"People think the AIDS epidemic is over," McDonald said. "That's scary because it's not."

The more people believe that, the more risks they may take — risks that could lead to a resurgence in the number of HIV cases.

"We are a take-a-pill society. People seem to think the drugs

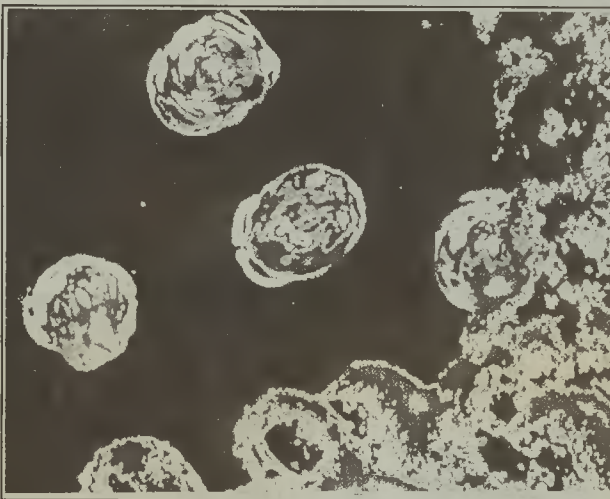
are a cure. I'm constantly amazed at the level of ignorance. HIV never leaves the body," said Randall Russell, director of AIDS Task Force of Alabama.

While the first-ever drop in the number of new AIDS cases was reported this month, health officials say they do not have comprehensive information on the rate of HIV infection.

The latest figures available, covering 1987 to 1992, show there were about 40,000 to 80,000 new HIV infections a year. All states report AIDS cases and deaths to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, but only 30 count HIV infection, too.

AIDS groups are seeing a large increase in the number of HIV and AIDS cases involving women and minorities, said Thomas Bartenbach, director of Indiana Cares, which works with 12 AIDS centers in Indiana.

A new federal study found the number of AIDS cases among women is rising more quickly than among men. From 1991 through 1995, the number of women diagnosed with AIDS increased by a whopping 63 percent, compared with 12.8 percent among males. And for the first time, more women are being infected through heterosexual contact than through drug use.



The study also found AIDS cases diagnosed in 1996 rose 19 percent among heterosexual black men and 12 percent among heterosexual black women.

"Younger people think they can participate in risky behavior again. They have no fear," said McDonald, who gives speeches to school and businesses for the Columbus AIDS Task Force. "Heterosexuals still think this is a gay disease and not as their disease, too."

Education about AIDS is more important than ever, said Daniel Zingale, director of AIDS Action, a national organization that represents 2,000 AIDS groups.

"It'll be a tragedy if people start walking away from prevention," he said. "The worst is not over."

## Time for influenza shots is now

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's time to roll up your sleeves. Flu season is here.

Even though influenza, the germ that causes the disease, doesn't hit hard for another month or two, now is a good time to start thinking about — or even get — a vaccination.

"As soon as the annual vaccine becomes available, usually in September, people in high-risk groups should get inoculated," says Dr. W. Paul Glaxen, an epidemiologist at Baylor University's Influenza Research Center. "If it hits early, the elderly and others need to be protected."

The folks most at risk are the elderly, but people who are younger with chronic health problems involving the heart or lungs have a high risk for hospitalization during the annual flu epidemic. Also at risk are people with diabetes, kidney disease, anemia, sickle cell anemia and immune system disorders.

Contrary to popular belief, the disease can not be contracted through the vaccination. Vaccines are derived from killed virus. Vaccinations, on average, are 85 percent effective.

Normally, flu season doesn't begin until after Thanksgiving,

but it can come earlier, researchers say. Symptoms to look for include fever, muscle pain, weakness and fatigue, sore throat and a dry, hacking cough.

The Mecklenburg County Health Department will offer low cost flu and pneumonia vaccines Mondays and Tuesdays, Oct. 13 through Nov. 4. Flu shots are \$10 and pneumonia vaccines are \$15.

Vaccines are free to patients with Medicare B coverage.

Shots will be given at the Northwest Health Department, 2845 Beatties Ford Road and Southeast Health Department, 249 Billingsley Road from 8 a.m.-4 p.m.

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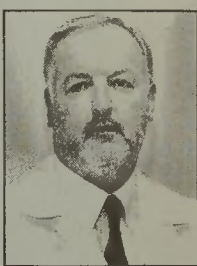
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