AIDS The epidemic killer that doesn't discriminate

Since the first discovered case in the United States in 1981, people have become increasingly aware of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). People are being educated so that hopefully the myths about how the disease can be contracted will be dispelled and people will know how to better protect themselves.

People must first begin to realize that AIDS is a disease that anyone can get through certain means. AIDS does not discriminate. Students are not immune. This is not a gay disease or an older person's disease, but an everybody’s disease.

Hopefully, this article will inspire the students of USL to seek more information, to act responsibly, to value your lives.

The virus that causes AIDS is called the HIV virus — the human immunodeficiency virus. While this virus causes AIDS, researchers are not certain that it always does. Yet, it is certain that anyone with the virus can pass it on to someone else.

The HIV virus, “depresses the immune system,” according to Dr. Rosalie Ardoin. Consequently, people infected with the HIV virus cannot fight off disease like healthy people can, and they may fall prey to opportunistic illnesses — those which take advantage of weak immune systems.

The two most common diseases affecting those infected with the HIV virus are Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) and Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS). KS is a type of cancer, and PCP is an infection of the lungs.

According to “Questions and Answers About AIDS,” a brochure sent by the government to homes across the country, “KS usually occurs anywhere on the surface of the skin or in the mouth. In early stages, it may look like a bruise or blue-violet or brownish spot. The spot or spots persist, and may grow larger.”

“PCP has symptoms similar to any other form of severe pneumonia, especially cough, fever, and difficulty in breathing.”

These and other opportunistic diseases help in diagnosing a person with AIDS.

“The HIV virus has a long incubation period,” reported Ardoin. It is said that after seven years, 40-50 percent of those infected with the HIV virus will develop AIDS. According to some researchers of the disease, in time all of those who are infected with the HIV virus will develop AIDS.

Although there is a period of time between contraction of the HIV virus and diagnosis of AIDS, Ardoin explained, “As soon as you are infected with the HIV virus, within the first month ... maybe the first week or two, nobody knows exactly when you are capable of transmitting it to someone else.”

The problem is that many people do not even know that they are infected and can pass the virus on to others. According to “Understanding AIDS,” a comprehensive brochure, “It is possible to be infected for years, feel fine, look fine and have no way of knowing you are infected unless you have a test for the AIDS virus.”

This is why people have to learn to protect themselves. One cannot tell by looking whether or not a person has AIDS. Precautionary steps must be taken.

First, according to “Understanding AIDS,” “You won’t get the AIDS virus through everyday contact with the people around you in school.”

AIDS isn’t contracted from saliva, urine, tears or sweat or even a kiss or a hug. One cannot “catch AIDS” from a toilet seat or dishes used by an infected person.

It is not possible to get AIDS from giving blood. The needles used for giving blood are new and are destroyed after one use.

According to the brochure, “The risk of getting AIDS from a blood transfusion has been greatly reduced. In the interest of making the blood supply as safe as possible, donors are screened for risk factors and donated blood is tested for the AIDS antibody.”

One can, however, contract AIDS through several other activities. AIDS CAN be contracted by sharing needles or syringes with someone else, engaging in anal sex — even with the use of a condom, engaging in sex without a condom with someone who is infected, having vaginal or oral sex with someone who engages in anal sex or uses IV drugs or has done either of these activities in the past, or having sex with someone who has had other partners.

Mothers who don’t even know they have the virus can give it to their babies before, during or after birth (through breast milk).

Safe behavior, as listed by the brochure “Understanding AIDS” consists of, “Not having sex [having sex with one mutually faithful, uninfected partner, not shooting drugs.”

Condoms have also come to be recognized as a part of safe behavior, though they are not foolproof. Things CAN go wrong. The trick is in knowing how to use the condoms.

“Understanding AIDS” goes on to explain the proper usage, “1) Use condoms made of latex rubber. Latex serves as a barrier to the virus. ‘Lambkin’ or ‘natural membrane’ condoms are not as good because of the pores in the material. Look for the word ‘latex’ on the package.”

The brochure also explains that condoms with spermicides can provide further protection. “Spermicides have been shown in laboratory tests to kill the virus. Use the spermicide in the tip and outside the condom.”

Using condoms is also reported to be safer when a water-based lubricant is used. Petroleum-based jelly and other oil based lubricants such as cooking oil may weaken condoms resulting in breakage.

Since male homosexual activity often includes anal intercourse, the disease is often transmitted in this way. As explained by Ardoin, the skin around the anus is very tender and may tear easily thus allowing body fluids (and the disease) to enter the bloodstream.

There have only been one or two reported cases of AIDS contracted from female homosexual activity.

If a person thinks that he is in one of these high risk categories, there is a test that can be taken to find out if he has been infected with the HIV virus. If the person tested has been infected, the test will be positive within 5-12 weeks after exposure.

The test is given at the Lafayette Public Health Unit on Thursdays from 12:30 p.m. to 3 p.m. and on Fridays from 8:30 a.m. to 9:30 a.m. The test, which requires filling a tube with blood, is free, and counseling is given before and after the test.

One may take the test anonymously, confidentially, or the person may give his or her name. Results may be obtained 3-4 weeks after the test.

Initially the blood goes through a screening test. If this test is negative, the person is not infected, but if it is positive, there is a possibility of infection.

Positive blood samples are then tested through the Western Blot method. If this test gives a positive reading, the person has been infected.

The test is also given at UMC and at a clinic sponsored by Lafayette C.A.R.E.S.

The national average life span after a person is diagnosed with AIDS, not the HIV virus, is two years; yet the average in Louisiana is six months.

For more information on AIDS, contact Lafayette C.A.R.E.S. at 233-2427.

“I do not think that young people in the heterosexual community think this affects them, and that’s the scary part,” commented Ardoin.

“The numbers of heterosexual cases are increasing. All we need to do is change our behavior.”

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