AIDS

Deadly disease shows up in teen population

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AIDS is beginning to show up in the teenage population of the Baton Rouge area.

Since January, Corey Caballero has counseled more than 10 local teens under the age of 18 who have tested HIV positive, denoting exposure to the AIDS virus. Caballero is a counselor with Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center's Immunological Support Program.

He also has counseled 15 to 20 women whose sex partners were IV drug users who exposed the women to the virus. The number of people seeking testing and counseling is increasing, Caballero said.

"Working with teen-agers in these numbers had never happened before," Caballero says. "What that means is AIDS is now also a disease in the adolescent age group. It's the same way among women; the number of cases is increasing, which in turn means more babies are at-risk of contracting the (AIDS) virus. Those groups are no longer on the periphery."

AIDS no longer is "the other person disease," said John Thilges with the East Baton Rouge Parish Health Unit.

More than 80 people per week are tested for AIDS through the unit's sexually transmitted diseases section. There is a 3 percent positivity rate, Thilges says.

AIDS testing procedures have improved and are more accurate than those in the past. Still, Thilges warns that a negative test does not necessarily mean the person hasn't contracted the virus.

"We're getting positive and negative results back in about seven working days," Thilges says. "This aspect has improved. It lessens panic if all the results — positive and negative — are back about the same time."

"But just because a person received a negative test result doesn't mean that person's clear. There's a window period of up to 10 years, which means teen-agers contracting the virus now might not test positive or show signs until they're in their 20s. That's why testing should be used as a tool to encourage safe, risk-free behavior."

Testing is done either anonymously with issuance of a code number, or in confidence where the person's identity remains undisclosed.

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More than 160 AIDS cases were reported in East Baton Rouge Parish through Sept. 5, according to statistics released in the AIDS Surveillance Report for Louisiana. The number of cases has more than doubled for the parish since September 1988, when there were 64 reported cases.

Louisiana's statewide statistics also have changed significantly since 1988. According to Surveillance Report figures from September 1990 and 1988:

- There were 2,100 AIDS cases reported in the state through September 1990, compared to 994 cases in 1988. The state's death rate remains at 65 percent.
- Reports of AIDS through heterosexual contact increased from 18 cases in 1988 (9 female, 9 male) to more than 73 cases (41 female, 32 male).
- More than 34 pediatric cases were reported as of September 1990, compared to 12 cases two years ago.
- The number of cases among homosexual/bisexual men has increased from 676 cases to 1,447. However, this population has decreased from 77 to 74 percent of the state's total cases.
- There were 144 cases reported among IV drug users through September 1990, compared to 55 cases in 1988.

Thilges says there still is ignorance concerning the transmission of the virus and discrimination against persons with AIDS. He said there also is a serious lack of long-term and routine treatment programs.

"Even with all the information available, there's still a lot of misconceptions about the virus and how it's transmitted," Thilges says.

"Another problem is in the treatment phase. We really need some type of facility for HIV-positive patients who can't afford health insurance. Patients unable to pay for medical care get on a waiting list for six to seven months at the C-100 unit (at Charity Hospital in New Orleans). There has to be a better way."