Fear of AIDS exposure prompting calls

About 100 area residents who received blood transfusions between 1978 and March 1985 called local health care agencies on Wednesday, concerned about the possibility of exposure to the AIDS virus.

The U.S. Public Health Agency on Tuesday recommended Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome antibody testing for people who received multiple blood transfusions between the time the AIDS virus first appeared and the start of donor blood screening.

“We’re anticipating that as many as 50,000 to 70,000 people in Louisiana want to be tested,” said Dr. Louise McFarland, state epidemiologist. “We’re prepared to offer testing and counseling to those who request it.”

Officials with the Community Blood Center, American Red Cross and the East Baton Rouge Parish Health Unit said they received about 100 calls from people and have recommended those people consult their physicians before undergoing testing for the AIDS antibody.

John Thilges, state Department of Health and Human Resources public health disease investigator, said that the public health unit conducts testing on an appointment basis. The unit phone number is 342-1799.

An estimated 230 New Orleans area resident who received blood transfusions during 1978 and April 1985 could have been infected with the AIDS virus, according to a blood bank official there.

Baton Rouge, however, is not considered a “high-risk city,” according to Community Blood Bank Center marketing director Gloria Gonzales.

“We feel very comfortable with the blood we are supplying to our community,” she said.

However, upon physician request, the Center will conduct testing for those concerned about the possibility of having the AIDS antibody, Gonzales said.

“I don’t agree with the (Public Health Agency) decision,” McFarland said. “I don’t believe in across-the-board screening and testing. When someone asks me if they should be tested, I usually say no. If they feel they could have been exposed to the AIDS virus, I advise them to change their lifestyle to prevent spreading the virus.”

Knowing that one has been exposed to AIDS really has no benefit, she said, with the exception that it will motivate some people not to spread the virus. There is no treatment at this time for those people who have tested positively for the AIDS antibody.

Of those who are shown to have antibodies to the AIDS virus, it is estimated that 50 percent will develop the disease — many of them as long as five to eight years after the initial exposure, she said. A person with the virus can infect others even if he doesn’t show symptoms.

“So, for many people, knowing that they’re exposed causes them nothing but worry about whether they will get AIDS. A lot of people don’t really want to know (whether they’ve been exposed).”

Nonetheless, parish health units and AIDS hotlines have been flooded with calls from concerned people asking about testing since the recommendation on Tuesday, she said.

In the New Orleans area, where there is greater cause for alarm because that is where the greatest numbers of AIDS patients have been diagnosed in the state, one blood bank official estimated that 230 people who received transfusions between 1978 and 1985 may have been infected with the AIDS virus.

Dr. David Smith, medical director of the Blood Center for Southeast Louisiana, said his estimate is based on a federal study of leukemia patients in New York City.

But Surgeon General D. Everett Koop said that estimate may be overstated. Koop told the Tulane University School of Medicine Tuesday that the campaign for testing should be aimed at people who received several transfusions during the period and lived in cities such as New York and San Francisco, where there have been many AIDS cases.

So far, some 32,000 AIDS cases and about 18,200 deaths have been reported nationwide. In Louisiana, there have been 393 cases and 255 deaths, according to health records. In East Baton Rouge Parish, there have been 30 cases.

Nationwide, an estimated 12,000 people may be identified eventually as having been exposed to the AIDS virus through transfusions.

The Baton Rouge AIDS Task Force operates a hotline, 929-8830, for those who have questions about the fatal disease.