

# It's important to learn how to prevent spread of AIDS

by Dr. James E. Berner  
for the Tundra Times

AIDS — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — has been present in Alaska for at least 10 years. Until now, almost all cases of AIDS in Alaska have been in the same high-risk groups as in the rest of the United States — homosexual and bisexual men, intravenous drug users and their heterosexual partners.

The total number of Alaska residents known to have AIDS, through June 30 is 100, of whom 55 are known to have died. Alaska Natives have presented 12 of these cases.

A virus known as HIV causes AIDS. The last stage of the infection is AIDS. An adult infected with HIV usually has no signs of illness for several years and during this time might not know he is infected. The infection could be knowingly spread by such a person, usually through sexual intercourse, sharing needles during IV drug use or by an infected pregnant woman to her unborn infant.

The number of infected people who are not yet sick is far larger than the number with AIDS.

The state of Alaska and the Indian Health Services offer confidential counseling and blood tests for HIV infection, available at virtually all regional hospitals and clinics. Blood tests for HIV infection became available in May 1985. From May 1985 through June, 21,828 Alaskans have been tested, of whom 338 are HIV infected (1.5 percent). A total of 3,580 of these Alaskans were Alaskan Natives, of whom 26 (0.7 percent) are infected.

There are undoubtedly infected people who do not know, or even suspect, they are infected with HIV. It is this group which is most likely to spread the HIV infection to others.

Using data gathered while testing Alaska Native young people who are enlisting in the military services, about one of every 1,000 young Alaska Native men may be infected with HIV, and most of them are not aware of their infection.

There are infected Alaska Native young women, as well, but estimating frequency of infection is not yet possible as too few young women have as yet been tested.

How, then, does this group of HIV-infected young people represent any threat to rural Alaska?

The answer to that question lies in three different characteristics of Alaska Native young people:

- A relatively high rate of sexually transmitted disease.
- A relatively high rate of alcohol and substance abuse.
- They are very mobile, frequently traveling between village to regional communities, to larger Alaskan cities, and the Lower 48.

These three characteristics combine to enable the spread of HIV infection to rural Alaska, potentially a serious threat to the health of village residents.

The spread of the AIDS virus from an infected man or woman to his or her sexual partner is much more likely if either partner has an infection

with HIV.

The larger the number of sexual partners, the greater the chance of becoming infected with the AIDS virus and/or a sexually transmitted disease. Sexual intercourse without a condom increases the risk even more.

The use of alcohol or other drugs can make a poor decision seem like a good idea. For instance, deciding to have sexual intercourse with someone you don't know well or someone whom you know has had many sexual partners.

Drugs and alcohol impair judgement and make high risk sexual activity much more likely, which makes the risk of becoming infected with the AIDS virus or getting an STD, more likely.

Village residents are highly mobile, especially young people. There is considerable travel throughout the state as a result of team sports, visiting relatives, holiday and vacation travel and for school or training. Because of this factor, young people can acquire an infection in a city or regional hub community and bring it back to the village and spread the infection among sexual partners in the village.

This, alcohol and drug abuse, STDs, multiple sexual partners and mobility all combine to create the potential for the rapid silent spread of HIV infection in rural Alaska.

Knowing the risk factors, people can make choices to protect themselves, their families and their villages.

It is important to realize that alcohol and drug use impair judgement and may lead to high risk behavior. Similarly it will greatly reduce the risk of STD or HIV infection if sexual relations are limited to a very few or better, a single sexual partner, whose history is known.

The use of condoms during sexual intercourse will significantly reduce the chances of becoming infected with the AIDS virus or STD but cannot totally prevent all such infections.

In summary, there is no evidence, as yet, that Alaska Native young people are infected in large numbers with the AIDS virus. There are, however, a small number of young people who do not know they are infected and can spread the infection. To reduce the risk of acquiring the AIDS virus, or an STD:

- Avoid alcohol and drugs.
- Do not have sex with individuals whose history is unknown to you or who are known to have multiple sex partners.
- Use condoms.
- Avoid certain well defined high-risk behaviors will generally protect people of all ages from AIDS.

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