

Survey shows need for AIDS education

While most Alaskans are knowledgeable about the basic biomedical facts concerning AIDS — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — and know that AIDS is transmitted through sex or AIDS-infected blood, many still harbor unwarranted fears about the spread of the disease through casual contact.

This is the conclusion of Alaska public health officials, based on a recent survey of 450 Alaskan households. The survey was conducted for the Division of Public Health of the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services by the Institute of Economic and Social Research of the University of Alaska-Anchorage.

Ninety-five percent of those responding to the survey know correctly that AIDS is a condition in which the body cannot fight diseases. Ninety-eight

percent also know correctly that AIDS is sexually transmitted, and an equal number know it can be transmitted by sharing a needle with a drug user who has AIDS.

But Alaskans are much less knowledgeable about casual contacts and the spread of AIDS. Twenty-eight percent of those responding, for instance, believe wrongly that AIDS can be spread by sharing drinking glasses with someone with AIDS. An additional 18 percent are not sure.

Fifteen percent believe wrongly that kissing can spread the disease, while an additional 18 percent are not sure. Sixteen percent believe wrongly that mosquitoes spread AIDS, 16 percent are not sure.

Many Alaskans also believe that somehow donors of blood are at risk for getting AIDS. Another significant misconception held by many is that a

new vaccine has recently been developed for the treatment of AIDS.

The misconception that blood donors are at risk for contracting AIDS may result from the publicity that before 1985, some who received donated blood developed AIDS. Many are apparently unaware that only sterile, disposal needles are used to draw blood at blood banks.

Many also seem unaware that the nation's blood supply has been cleaned of contaminated blood and that individuals are screened for the AIDS virus. Those who have it are not allowed to donate blood.

Scientists agree that no vaccine is likely to be developed for at least five years, and many believe it will be 10 years or longer before any AIDS vaccine can be developed.

It is obvious that Alaskans are concerned about AIDS. A substantial

number — 44 percent — are afraid of getting AIDS themselves. Also, 61 percent of respondents said they would not eat in a restaurant if they knew a food handler had AIDS.

An additional indicator of the public's fears about AIDS is that 25 percent say they would not let their child attend school with a child who has AIDS. Another 15 percent are not sure.

Dr. John Middaugh said the survey results underscore the need to provide accurate information about AIDS to all Alaskans.

Middaugh said additional efforts are being initiated to expand the state's free voluntary blood screening program so that public health officials can counsel those who are infected with the virus.

Middaugh said 72 percent of the respondents indicated they would take such a test if it were offered free.