

AIDS: Use Your Head

AIDS. No vaccine, no cure. 100% fatality rate. Average age of infection: 23. Increasingly common among heterosexuals, and far from eradicated in the gay population.

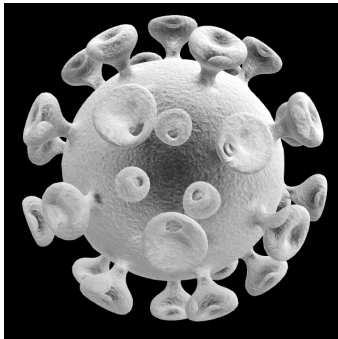
Pretty depressing, eh?

Well, yes and no. There's some good news on the AIDS scene, too.

The best news, of course, is that no one ever has to get this disease. That's right. AIDS is 100% preventable - all you need is some knowledge, some minimal skills, and the motivation to use them.

First you have to realize that this disease could affect your life. Whether you're married, monogamous, or even abstinent, you could be at risk. Our best estimates put the number of HIV infected students on our campus at about 50 (out of 30,000 students), but there are indications that this number could be higher - much higher. You can't tell by looking who's infected, and knowing your partner well is no protection at all - After all, you can't possibly know your partner's last partners' last partners' needle-sharing habits, for example.

Monogamy is no sure bet, either. If what you mean by monogamy is that your present partner is the only person you've ever had sex with, and you're the only person your partner has had sex with, then you're fine, assuming neither of you



has ever shared needles or had a blood transfusion before 1985. After all, it's a closed system, right? But if either one of you has ever had sex with anyone else, what you're really talking about is serial monogamy, and that's not safe.

But what about abstinence? That should be safe, right? Well, that depends on what you mean by abstinence. We've run into too many students who think they're abstinent because they don't have a partner right now, or because they have anal sex instead of vaginal - which actually puts them at higher risk. If you mean never having oral, anal or vaginal sex, never having any kind of penetration of body openings, never having any exchange of blood, semen or vaginal fluids, then yes, you're safe. Of course, this still leaves a lot of room for some pretty hot encounters - phone sex, massage, etc., etc. - Use your imagination!

However, needle sharing is another very high risk activity. And I'm not talking street drugs here, necessarily, either. I'm talking steroids, tattoos, piercing - anything that involves needles used by more than one person. New, disposable needles are the answer, if you must use needles. "Sterile" is the key word, not just "clean looking".

Condoms are the other important part of HIV prevention. That's latex or polyurethane condoms, used correctly, every time you have intercourse. Forget the stories about HIV swimming

right through the pores in condoms - HIV is usually bonded on to a cell which is far too large to pass through the pores, and the surface tension of the semen is also a factor in keeping HIV in the condom. A study of 250 couples where one partner was HIV positive found that among the couples who used condoms consistently and correctly, none of the uninfected partners became infected. Condom use in Thailand has substantially reduced the HIV infection rate there, which was skyrocketing because of the very active sex trade.

Bottom line - Don't let AIDS depress you, or scare you witless. Just use your head. Avoid the exchange of the body fluids that can transmit HIV - blood, semen, and vaginal fluids. You can do that by not doing anything that involves exchange of body fluids, or by using condoms and sterile needles.

Your future depends on it.

For more information on avoiding unplanned pregnancy, managing stress, and generally staying healthy and productive as a student, visit the Student Health Resource Centre, 2-300 SUB, or surf over to www.ualberta.ca/HealthInfo