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CONTACT: Leslie Kinnee

989-831-3669, kinnee@mmdhd.org

Mid-Michigan District Health Department

615 N. State St., Stanton, MI 48888-9702, www.mmdhd.org

Protect yourself against HIV and AIDS

Stanton~ No disease affects all sectors of society equally like HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) and AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome); men and women, young and old, black and white, gay and straight, rich and poor. Anyone who engages in unsafe sex practices or shares needles has an equal chance of contracting the life-changing disease and passing it to others.

Many remember the HIV/AIDS panic of the 1980s and assume the cause for concern has passed, but nothing could be further from the truth. While the death rate has declined since the peak in the mid-1980s, the number of people contracting and living with the disease is increasing.

Each day in the U.S. over 6,800 people are infected with the virus while more than 300 people die from AIDS-related illnesses. In Michigan alone an estimated 17,000 people are currently living with HIV and AIDS with diagnoses among adolescents (aged 13-19) and young adults (age 20-24) on the rise. What is even more troubling is that about one quarter of those infected don't know it, and that puts them and others at risk.

HIV, which attacks the immune system and the body's ability to fight infections, often goes undiagnosed because initial symptoms are flu-like in nature (fever, fatigue, headache, sore throat, muscle aches and swollen lymph nodes). Some newly infected people develop a red rash. In others the only sign of HIV infection is swollen lymph nodes. Others will not develop any symptoms at all. The only way to know for sure is to get tested.

AIDS is the final stage of HIV infection. It can take years for a person infected with HIV, even without treatment, to reach this stage. Having AIDS means that the virus has weakened the immune system to the point at which the body has a difficult time fighting infection.

HIV is not transmitted through day-to-day activities such as shaking hands, hugging, or a casual kiss. You cannot become infected from a toilet seat, drinking fountain, doorknob, dishes, drinking glasses, food, pets or mosquitoes.

Transmission can occur when blood, semen, pre-seminal fluid, vaginal fluid or breast milk from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person. HIV can also be transmitted through receipt of infected blood or blood-clotting factors. However, since 1985, all donated blood in the U.S. has been tested for HIV. Therefore our donor blood supply is extremely safe.

“The surest way to avoid transmission of HIV is to not share needles, abstain from sexual intercourse, or to be in a long-term mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and you know is uninfected,” said Dr. Robert Graham, Medical Director for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD).

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2- HIV/AIDS

For persons whose sexual behaviors place them at risk for HIV, correct and consistent use of a latex condom can reduce the risk of transmission. However, no protective method is 100 percent effective, and condom use cannot guarantee absolute protection.

You may be at risk for HIV infection if you have:

- ever injected drugs or steroids, during which equipment was shared with others
- had unprotected sex
- been given a diagnosis of, been treated for, hepatitis, tuberculosis (TB), or a sexually transmitted disease (STD)
- received a blood transfusion or clotting factor from 1978-1985

According to Dr. Graham, when it comes to HIV and AIDS, time is of the essence. “The bottom line is to not put yourself at risk for contracting the disease, and if you already have, get tested right away. The sooner HIV and AIDS is detected, the longer you are likely to live.”

If you think you may have been exposed to HIV you should contact your family doctor or MMDHD right away to schedule a test. MMDHD offers anonymous and confidential testing and counseling. For more information visit www.mmdhd.org or to schedule an appointment, please call MMDHD at:

Clinton County: 989-224-2195

Gratiot County: 989-875-3681

Montcalm County: 989-831-5237

The Mid-Michigan District Health Department serves Clinton, Gratiot and Montcalm counties.

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