

HIV & THE BLACK COMMUNITY

HOW COMMON IS HIV AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS?

From coast to coast, HIV has disproportionately affected African-American communities. Though blacks make up only 13 percent of the U.S. population, they account for nearly half of all new AIDS cases. AIDS is the No. 1 killer of black women ages 25 to 34. The rate of new cases of AIDS among African Americans is almost 10 times higher than among whites.

DOES HIV AFFECT AFRICAN AMERICANS DIFFERENTLY?

Advances in antiretroviral (ARV) therapy have benefited all HIV-positive people with access to treatment. While AIDS deaths have declined overall, the decrease has been more dramatic among whites than among people of color. Though it's unlikely that HIV progresses faster or that HIV treatment is less effective in African Americans, it is possible that they receive less adequate health care than whites.

African-American people are also at a higher risk for other health problems, which can make managing HIV infection more difficult. These include:

- **High blood pressure and heart disease.** Both conditions, which can lead to heart attacks and heart failure, are nearly 40 percent more common in blacks than whites. Because ARVs, and HIV itself, can further increase the risk of cardiovascular disease, monitoring heart health is an important part of medical care for HIV-positive African-American men and women.
- **Diabetes.** Compared with whites, blacks are almost twice as likely to develop this disease, where the body is unable to properly control the amount of sugar in the blood. Left untreated, diabetes can cause damage to the kidneys, eyes, heart and nerves. ARVs can increase the risk of blood sugar problems, so HIV-positive African Americans may want to address the diabetes risk factors they can control: by exercising, eating healthy, keeping their weight down and having regular lab tests.
- **Kidney disease.** Blacks are nearly four times more likely to develop kidney disease compared with whites. Eighty-five percent of cases of HIV-related kidney damage, nephropathy, involve African Americans.
- **Hepatitis C.** Compared with whites, blacks are twice as likely to suffer from this life-threatening form of liver disease caused by the hepatitis C virus (HCV). Hep C is harder to treat in HIV-positive people and can increase the risk of ARV liver side effects.

ACCESS TO CARE

Studies show that the degree of experience your doctor has treating people with HIV can dramatically affect your health. The more experienced your doctor is, the better your chances of staying well. Unfortunately, African Americans in general are less likely to have health insurance and more likely to depend on government-funded health care. Also, because the epidemic in the African-American community is spreading to more rural areas, people may have to travel long distances to find a doctor with a lot of experience treating HIV. Fortunately, some of the best HIV doctors work in public hospitals and health clinics, and it may be worth going the extra distance to see them. There are also AIDS service organizations (ASOs) in most cities, counties or states that can help you access health care and other supportive services that can help you stay well—physically, emotionally and financially.

QUICK TIPS

Use these helpful hints to increase your chances for a long, healthy and happy life.

■ BUST THE MYTHS

Learn as much as you can about HIV and the epidemic. Word on the street isn't always true. Be curious and ask questions.

■ HISTORY LESSON

Make sure your doctor knows all about your medical history—and your family's, too. Some health concerns, like heart disease and diabetes, can run in your family.

■ TESTS

Understanding all your lab tests and what they mean, not just your CD4 count and viral load, will keep you in charge and in control of your health.

■ DOCTOR RELATIONS

Remember, your doctor works for you, or at least he or she should. If your doc doesn't treat you with respect and understanding, find one who does.

■ SUPPORT

Surround yourself with family members, friends and professionals who care about and support you in the ways you need.

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