

Still fighting HIV/AIDS in Montana

By Jace Dyckman

When the first World AIDS Day was organized on Dec. 1, 1988, HIV and AIDS were in the news daily. Since then, the U.S. death rate has plummeted, and new treatments make it possible to live a long life with this virus. Medication and safer behavior can prevent new infections.

As we marked the 36th World AIDS Day on December 1, this disease still infects 1.2 million Americans, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). About 31,800 Americans each year are diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) which can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS).

In Montana, 840 people are living with HIV, with 28 people diagnosed in 2023. Statewide, 1 in 4 people living with HIV/AIDS are not being treated. Of the people being treated, more than 94% are receiving medications to prevent the spread of disease.

In Yellowstone County, 6 people have been diagnosed with HIV in just the last 4 months. Most of the cases are in young men aged 25-36. The most common risk factor for HIV among these patients is men having sex with men. Some of those patients also have injected drugs. Sharing needles for injecting drugs also is a risk factor among heterosexual people who have HIV.

This mirrors national trends. In 2022, gay, bisexual and other men who reported male-to-male sexual contact accounted for 67% of the new HIV infections nationwide and 83% of estimated infections among all men.

Although treatment has allowed many people with HIV/AIDS to live longer lives, many of the young people who are being newly diagnosed don't remember the terrible suffering and fatalities of the first decades of this epidemic. HIV remains an incurable, potentially fatal disease.

Treatment, testing and prevention

Although incurable, HIV/AIDS is a chronic treatable disease. There are effective medicines that can reduce the virus to undetectable levels in the body and allow infected people to live long healthy lives — if they keep taking their medicine. Medication adherence is the best tool we have to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.

People living with HIV can receive services through the federal Ryan White Act. At RiverStone Health, about 170 people receive physician care, prescriptions, case management, testing and other services through RiverStone Health HIV Services. This program helps people with HIV/AIDS overcome obstacles to getting treatment and works to prevent new infections.

About 80% of new HIV infections are spread by people who don't know they are infected, according to the CDC. That's why it is important to be tested for HIV.

The CDC recommends that everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 should get tested for HIV at least once as part of routine health care. People should get tested more often when they have had more than one sex partner or are having sex with someone whose sexual history they don't know. Some sexually active gay and bisexual men may benefit from more frequent testing. Free,

confidential testing is available at RiverStone Health and in many other Montana communities. To find a testing location near you, go to gettested.cdc.gov.

The last decade has seen the approval of PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, to combat HIV and prevent high-risk people from ever getting infected. PrEP is a pill taken every day to prevent HIV infection from sex or injection drug use.

Montanans need to be aware that this virus is still a health threat. We can eliminate this threat and finally end this epidemic. Each of us needs to know our HIV status and take personal responsibility to avoid infection.

For more information about RiverStone Health HIV/AIDS services, including testing, treatment or PrEP, call 406-651-6416, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. weekdays.

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