

# HIV/AIDS and the Black Community

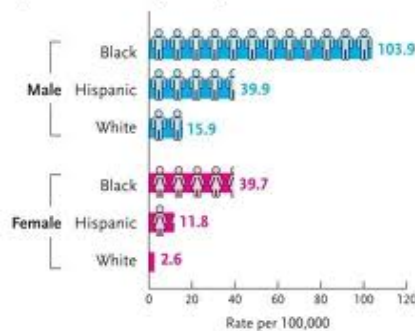


Statistics tell the story.

African Americans are **14%** of the U.S. population, but in 2009 accounted for:

**44%** of new HIV diagnoses; **46%** of Americans living with HIV; **56%** of AIDS deaths; **65%** of new AIDS cases among teenagers; and **66%** of new AIDS cases among women.

Estimated Rate of New HIV Infections, 2009,  
by Gender and Race/Ethnicity



Source: CDC

The rate of newly diagnosed HIV infections among blacks in 2009 was almost 8 times higher than that of whites, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (See graphic at left.) The HIV infection rate among black men was the highest of any group by race and gender – more than 6 times that of white men. And the HIV infection rate among black women was 15 times that of white women.

AIDS is the No. 3 cause of death among black men aged 35-44 and black women aged 25-44, the CDC says.

**The CDC projects that if current infection rates continue, 1 in 16 black males and 1 in 32 black females will be diagnosed with HIV during their lifetimes!**

In Western New York, African Americans are **10%** of the population, but in 2009 accounted for: **35%** of new HIV diagnoses and **38%** of persons living with HIV/AIDS, according to the state Health Department's AIDS Institute. At the end of 2009, there were 873 black WNYers known to be living with HIV/AIDS, including 49 in Niagara County.

"HIV remains one of the most glaring health disparities in this country," said Dr. Kevin Fenton, director of the CDC's National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD and TB Prevention.

## Why the disparity?

There seems to be no single reason why Human Immunodeficiency Virus is walloping the black community so badly.

**STDs:** One factor may be that the rates of other sexually transmitted diseases is high among the black population, and the wounds and sores of an STD infection can open the way to the bloodstream for subsequent HIV infection. Black Americans have 8 times the rate of Chlamydia and 18 times the rate of gonorrhea than white Americans do. Also, while the general rate of genital herpes infections is 21%

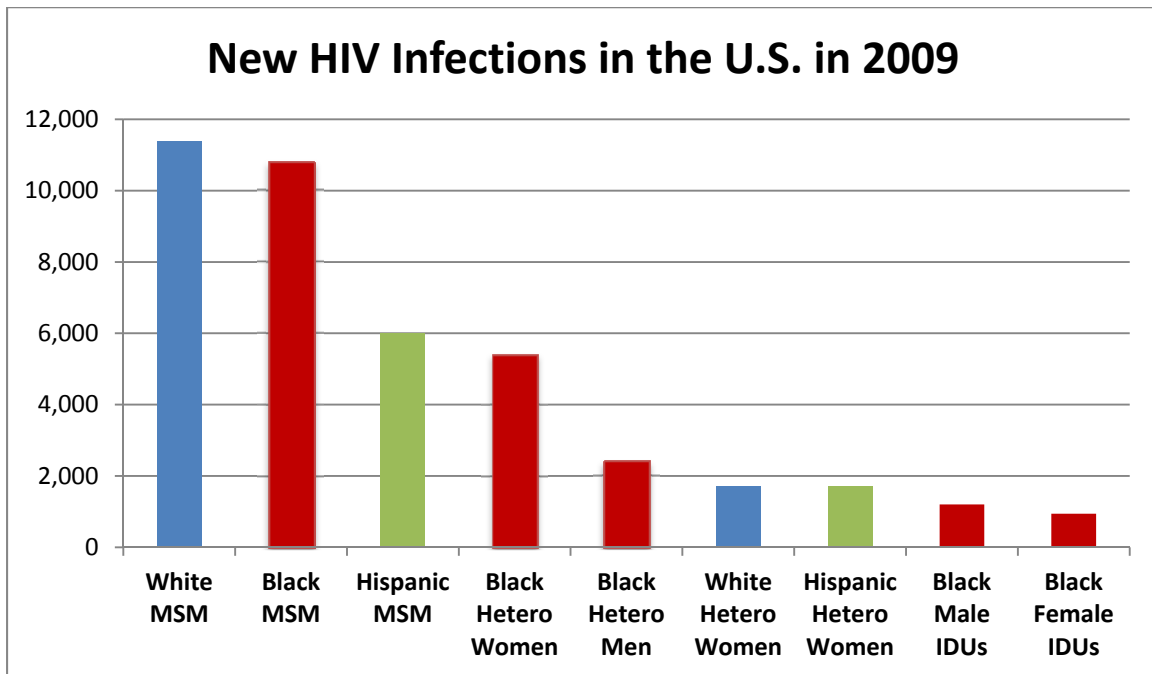
*There's no reason to risk using dirty needles. Syringes are available at any pharmacy in New York State without a prescription. There's also a syringe exchange program at AIDS Community Services in Buffalo; call 847-0315 for details.*

among all American women and 12% of all American men, it is 48% among black women and 39% among black men, the CDC says.

**Drugs:** African Americans are also more likely than whites to be intravenous drug users, and careless sharing of needles accounts for about 18 percent of HIV infections in the black community nationally. Also, crack cocaine and crystal methamphetamine can lower inhibitions and increase the likelihood of engaging in high-risk sexual behavior.

**Socio-economic factors:** Nearly a quarter of African Americans live below the poverty level, including about 40% of female-headed households. Poverty can lead women to be careless in sexual encounters, giving in to male demands for unprotected sex for fear of endangering the relationship and their hopes of obtaining greater financial security for themselves and their children.

**Stigma:** Homosexuality is decried in most African American churches and seems to be frequently stigmatized in the black community. That can lead black men who have sex with men to keep their sexuality hidden. Sometimes a man will maintain a relationship with a woman who is unaware he is having sex with other men in secret. Unless everyone involved is practicing safe sex, women in these relationships are at risk of becoming HIV infected. Stigma also may prevent people from seeking HIV testing and treatment for fear friends or relatives will find out.



MSM = Men who have sex with men. IDUs = Intravenous drug users. SOURCE: CDC

**Aside from men who have sex with men, black heterosexual women are the demographic most impacted by Human Immunodeficiency Virus.**

### Women must be very cautious about sex

The vast majority of HIV-positive American women were infected through heterosexual sex. For black women newly diagnosed in 2009, 87% contracted the virus this way, according to the CDC. Only 13% got it from intravenous drug use.

A woman is twice as likely as a man to get HIV infection during vaginal sex because the lining of the vagina provides a large area of potential exposure to HIV-infected semen. Any irritation of that lining from STDs, vaginal dryness or other factors further increases the risk.

Some women become infected because they may be unaware of a male partner's risk factors for HIV infection or have a lack of knowledge about how HIV is transmitted. Relationship dynamics also play a role. For example, some women may not insist on condom use because they fear that their partner will physically abuse or leave them.



Black women must be proactive about protecting themselves.

The consequences of HIV infection in black women can be devastating. In 2008, the death rate for HIV-positive black women was nearly 20 times higher than for HIV-positive white women, and nearly 4 times higher than for HIV-positive Hispanic women.

If HIV isn't discovered early and treated, it will probably advance to AIDS. In 2009, AIDS diagnoses were 23 times higher among black women than among white women, and more than 4 times higher than for Hispanic women, according to the CDC.

**WARNING:** Unprotected anal sex poses an even greater risk for HIV transmission for women than unprotected vaginal sex does.

**The lesson:** Remember the ABCs of HIV Prevention. Abstinence is the surest way to avoid HIV. Being faithful in a sexual relationship with someone who is mutually faithful to you will protect you both. Condoms – male latex condoms – must otherwise be used every time you have sex. (So-called “natural” or lambskin condoms provide no HIV protection, and female condoms are not quite as effective as male latex condoms. If either partner has a latex allergy, use polyurethane condoms.)

## Young gay/bi black males at high risk

For most risk groups, HIV infection rates were stable over the years 2006-2009, according to a CDC study released in August. But for one risk group – black males aged 13 to 29 who engaged in sex with other men – the infection rate skyrocketed 48%, from an estimated 4,400 cases nationally in 2006 to an estimated 6,500 cases in 2009.

(However, because this is a relatively small demographic, and because of the research methodology used in sampling, there could be some problems with this data. We don't regard the study's numbers for this particular risk group as gospel.)

Nevertheless, the incidence of new HIV infections among young black men is increasing. It is important for these young men to understand that they are at high risk of infection if they do not use condoms. Researchers speculate that young men in this group often defer to older, more masculine partners in the specifics of sexual encounters, and that these older men often insist on unprotected anal sex.



Young black MSMs are at high risk of HIV infection.

## Love and trust won't protect you

Gay teenage boys who are in what they consider a “serious relationship” with another male are 10 times more likely to have unprotected anal sex than those in “casual” encounters, according to a study by Northwestern University published in 2011.

This study reinforces previous findings that over two-thirds of HIV transmissions between U.S. gay men happen between primary sex partners and only a third between casual partners.

The study included 122 young men (aged 16-20) who had sex with men. The mean age was 18.5 years; 23% were under 18. Half of the group described themselves as African-American.

Half reported being in a serious relationship, and 80% reported having been in at least one serious relationship over the 18-month study period. Despite such “commitment,” truly long-term relationships were rare: only 8% of participants reported having the same partner six months later. During the 18-month study period 20% of participants reported no serious relationship, 23% one, 27% two, and 28% three or more, to a maximum of five.

They averaged 3.5 sexual partners over the 18-month study period. The study found an average of 5.74 episodes of unprotected sex within each sexual partnership they had.

**The lesson:** Men this young are probably not at a time of life when they can truly establish a committed, mutually-exclusive long-term relationship, no matter how in love they feel at the moment. Most remain promiscuous. Therefore, they have to be careful to use condoms *every time* they have sex, no matter with whom they have sex.

## What to do to protect yourself

- Don't engage in dangerous, unprotected sex.
- Get tested for HIV. If you are infected, early treatment can prevent the virus from advancing to AIDS.
- Get inoculated against hepatitis A and B if you are sexually promiscuous. Hepatitis can cause severe liver damage.



## Links for more information

AVERT, an international HIV and AIDS charity, based in the UK:

[www.avert.org/hiv-african-americans.htm](http://www.avert.org/hiv-african-americans.htm)

The Henry Kaiser Family Foundation's Fact Sheet on Black Americans and HIV/AIDS:

[www.kff.org/hivaids/upload/6089-09.pdf](http://www.kff.org/hivaids/upload/6089-09.pdf)

The Black AIDS Institute:

[www.blackaids.org](http://www.blackaids.org)

The MOCHA Center (health and wellness for communities of color):

[www.mochacenter.org](http://www.mochacenter.org)



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