

HIV/AIDS and Women & Girls



About 25% of Americans living with HIV/AIDS are women.

The percentages are higher locally. Across the 8 counties of Western New York, women comprise 32% of people living with HIV/AIDS, and in Niagara County, 33%.

The vast majority of women get infected through heterosexual sex, unlike men, who mostly get it through homosexual contact.

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 sexually transmitted diseases or other factors further increases the risk.

Older widows and divorcees are especially in danger unless they practice safe sex. Age can bring vaginal thinning and dryness that can lead to vaginal irritation and tears that provide an entry for HIV into the bloodstream.

This is particularly relevant for the Buffalo-Niagara region, where demographics are skewing toward the senior side. In 2009, about 24% of the national population was aged 55 and older, while in Niagara County it was 29% and projected to grow to 32% by 2015.

WARNING: Unprotected anal sex poses an even greater risk for HIV transmission for women than unprotected vaginal sex does. It is even possible to become infected through oral sex, especially if a woman has a cold sore, throat irritation or other factor that could open a path to the bloodstream.

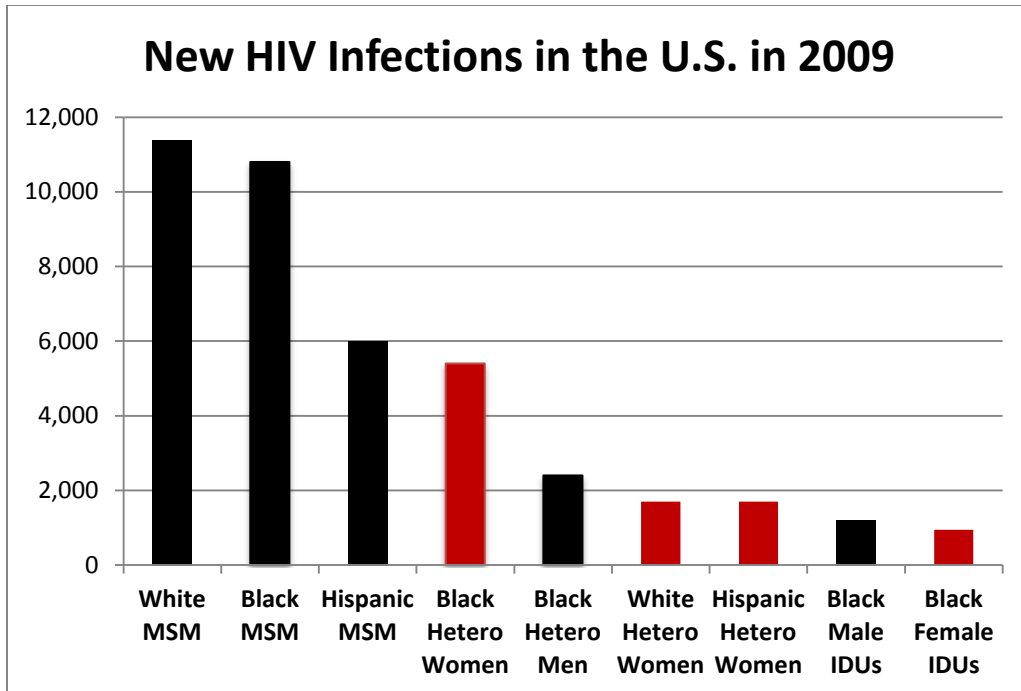
Remember the ABCs of HIV Prevention:

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.)

And get tested. If you are infected, early treatment can prevent the virus from advancing to AIDS. **Of the 33 Western New York women who were newly diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 2009, 11 of them tested late, meaning they already had AIDS or were likely to get it within a year.** Testing is so important that New York State law requires that HIV tests be offered to virtually everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 receiving hospital or primary care services. The offering must be made to inpatients, persons seeking services in emergency departments, persons receiving primary care as an outpatient at a clinic or from a physician, physician assistant, nurse practitioner or midwife.



After men who have sex with men, heterosexual women comprise the most newly diagnosed HIV cases.

Pregnancy considerations

If a pregnant woman is HIV-positive, it is possible to transfer the infection to her baby, either during pregnancy, at childbirth, or through breastfeeding. The chances of infecting the baby are about 25% if the mother does not get treated for HIV. The good news is that the risk of transmission falls to less than 2% if the mother does get treated.



That's why it's so important that any woman who is pregnant or is trying to get pregnant should promptly get tested for HIV. If she tests positive, her doctor will advise immediate antiretroviral therapy. If she tests negative, her doctor will probably advise another test mid-way through the pregnancy just to make sure.

At time of labor, every woman is offered another HIV test. And all babies born in New York State are tested for HIV within 12 hours of birth.

For some HIV-infected mothers, a scheduled cesarean delivery (also called a C-section) at 38 weeks of pregnancy can reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

All of these preventive measures have brought a dramatic improvement in mother-to-child transmission. Only 3 babies in all of New York State were born with HIV in 2010, down from 97 just 13 years earlier.

Within 6 to 12 hours after delivery, babies born to HIV-positive mothers receive an anti-HIV medication called AZT. The babies receive it for 6 weeks. AZT is believed to be safe for babies. However, the medicine hasn't been used in pregnant women long enough to know exactly what will happen to their children when they get older. Talk about the risks and benefits of AZT with your doctor.

A woman who has HIV or AIDS should not breastfeed. There's a 15% chance of transmitting the virus to newborns if they're breastfed for 24 months.

Remember: The earlier a woman knows her HIV status, the more options she has for her health care, her pregnancy – and if she carries to term, for her baby's health.

How women and girls can lower their risks

- **Practice safe sex.** If you're not in a mutually faithful relationship, always use latex condoms. Dental dams can also be used to lower risk.
- **Don't be promiscuous.** Your risk of HIV infection goes up with the number of sex partners you have. Get inoculated against hepatitis A and B if you are sexually promiscuous. Hepatitis can cause severe liver damage.
- **Don't share needles.** Syringes are available without prescription at any pharmacy in the state, so there's no need to share dirty needles.
- **Get screened for STDs.** The wounds and sores of a sexually transmitted infection such as gonorrhea, Chlamydia and genital herpes can open the way to the bloodstream for subsequent HIV infection.
- **Don't douche.** Douching removes some of the normal bacteria in the vagina that helps protect against infection. Vaginal infection can open a pathway to the bloodstream for HIV.
- **Don't use nonoxynol-9.** This spermicidal can irritate the vagina, opening a pathway for HIV.
- **Don't abuse alcohol or drugs.** Inebriation can lead to sexual risk-taking or to sexual assault.



Don't keep the blinders on about the risks to your health.

Take the initiative in protecting yourself

Every woman should accept responsibility for her health. **Insist on condom use.** Be ready to counter every objection.

If he says: "Trust me. I don't have any diseases."

You say: "It's not about trust. Some people have sexually transmitted infections and don't even know it because they have no symptoms. Using a condom will protect both of us."

If he says: "Sex doesn't feel as good with a condom."

You say: "Let's try another brand or style."

If he says: "Stopping to put on a condom spoils the mood."

You say: "I can't enjoy sex if it's not safe."

If he says: "Let's just do it this one time without a condom."

You say: "It only takes one time to get pregnant or a sexually transmitted disease."

If he says: "I don't have a condom with me."

You say: "No problem. I do."

This kind of resolute determination can be difficult for a woman who feels unempowered in a relationship, if she fears her partner may physically abuse her or leave her. If that's the case, she should get help. Start with the YWCA, which has a number of empowerment programs for women.

If real violence or intimidation is involved, call the National Domestic Violence Hotline, a toll-free resource at 1-800-799-SAFE (7233). In Niagara County, contact the Sheriff's Office Domestic Violence Intervention Program, 438-3301.



Make it a rule: No condom, no sex.

Additional resources

The Ryan White Transportation Program offers gasoline debit cards, Metro tokens, bus passes – and in special cases, door-to-door rides by taxi or van so people can get to physicians, clinics, dentists and HIV-related services such as support groups, counseling sessions and nutritional services. Contact Monica Brown at Greater Buffalo Chapter of the American Red Cross, (716) 878-2394.

The Housing Opportunities for Persons With AIDS Program aims to prevent people living with HIV/AIDS from becoming homeless. It will pay rent, mortgage and utilities on a short-term basis for people who are falling behind on their bills. It also will pay a security deposit and first-month's rent for people who have to move to more secure or accommodating housing and lack the funds to do so. To apply, call the Red Cross at (716) 878-2340 for an application.

ADAP Plus is a free program that helps low-income HIV-positive people who are not on Medicaid get medical care, medications and home care. Contact MOCHA, (716) 852-1142.

Links for more information

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office on Women's Health (sponsor of National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day)

www.womenshealth.gov/hiv-aids

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/women

The Body

www.thebody.com/index/whatis/women.html

AIDS.gov

www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/staying-healthy-with-hiv-aids/taking-care-of-yourself/womens-health

HIV Wisdom for Older Women

<http://hivwisdom.org/facts.html>



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