

HARC report details HIV risk in Coachella Valley

Written by Victoria Pelham The Desert Sun

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Almost 67 percent of adults in eastern Riverside County have never been tested for HIV, according to a special report issued by the Health Assessment Resource Center to time with National HIV Testing Day, held to raise awareness June 27 each year.

That rate stands out in an area where HIV prevalence is 67 percent higher and AIDS 500 percent higher than the national average, local HIV- and AIDS-related professionals said. And the Center for Disease Control estimates that approximately one in five of those who don't know their status are HIV-positive.

"The prevalence is so high here, just by the nature of living here, you're at risk," said Brande Orr, director of grants and quality assurance at Desert AIDS Project. "The only way to stop the infection rate is to have everybody know their status."

The HARC report also showed that adults ages 35 to 44 were the most likely to have been tested for HIV, at 62 percent, compared with 53 percent for ages 25 to 34. The rates dropped among youth and senior populations, with young adults ages 18 to 24 reporting a 39 percent testing rate and 8 percent for those 75 and older. And men, at 38 percent, were more likely to test for HIV, compared with 28 percent for women.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people were much more likely to be tested for HIV, at 75 percent compared with 29 percent of heterosexual valley residents. And 81 percent of those engaged in one or more risky behaviors, including intravenous drug use, anal sex with a condom, prostitution, or treatment from a sexually transmitted disease within the past year, had been tested. Just 31 percent of those not engaged in risky behaviors had been tested.

But races tested at relatively similar rates, with about 44 percent of Hispanics reporting that they had been tested, 30 percent of blacks, 29 percent white and 33 percent other, differences that were not "statistically significant," according to HARC.

In addition, the report found that those who do not use condoms were less likely to have been tested for HIV at 32 percent, compared with 57 percent of those who do use condoms.

It noted, though, that 81.2 percent of those who said they did not use condoms and had not been tested, also said they were in a monogamous relationship.

"There's so many different factors, and there's so many maybes as to why," said Eileen Packer, chief executive officer at HARC, stressing the importance of getting tested.

The organization conducted about 2,500 tests last year in the Coachella Valley and hopes to increase that number to about 3,100 in the next 12 months, an increase of 24 percent, Orr said. They test at 25 different locations from Hemet to Blythe including their facilities, LGBT Community Center of the Desert in Palm Springs, and Martha's Village and Kitchen in Indio. They also have started to work with College of the Desert and Cal State San Bernardino-Palm Desert this spring to conduct youth HIV testing there.

Desert AIDS Project is hosting HIV testing from 3 to 7 p.m. today at its Palm Springs site ,with \$10 gift

card incentives for those who stay and wait for their results, according to staff.

The HIV and STD program at Riverside County Department of Public Health also offers testing using a mobile van throughout the county and sometimes partners with Desert AIDS Project, according to Carolyn Lieber, its program director. Last year, the agency tested about 1,500 people. The program will be hosting its own HIV Testing Day event from 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Thursday at Riverside Neighborhood Health Center.

The testing process takes about 20 minutes with a cheek swab swiped on your gums and is free and confidential. Follow-up blood tests are usually the next step, since these preliminary tests can occasionally give false positives, Orr said.

AIDS workers in the Coachella Valley said testing is vital because it helps prevent the spread of the disease and also can get a person into treatment early on, causing the medication to be much more effective.

They also expressed hope that it would become a routine part of medical exams like a cholesterol screening.

“We think, ‘Oh, stigma’s a thing of the past. We can talk to kids about having safe sex and using condoms. We’re beyond all that,’ ” Orr said.

“But the truth is there’s less and less of the discussion, and stigma around just talking about sexual health is still very prevalent.”

Darlene McBrayer, 80, of Palm Springs was diagnosed with HIV in 1995. Her son, at the time critically ill with AIDS, had requested she be tested as one of his last wishes. As a heterosexual woman, she thought her chances of having it were “bologna.” She was tested at a neighborhood clinic and diagnosed the week her son died.

McBrayer had been infected in a relationship after her husband had passed away, she said.

She said people need to be very careful and smart about it, because too many people these days think HIV is no longer a threat.

“Taking all those pills is no basket of roses,” McBrayer said.

The illness had complicated her other aging conditions and made her osteoporosis extremely painful.

“They need to tell the kids in schools more because there’s a lot of misinformation out there, and it’s pretty bad,” she said. “This is 30 years down the line, and there’s still just extreme misinformation — and no information at all in a lot of places.”