



HIV TESTS BECOME PART OF REGULAR CHECK-UPS

Your next doctor appointment might include an HIV test due to new recommendations from the government agency for infectious diseases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The CDC now recommends that health providers make voluntary HIV screening a routine part of medical care for all patients aged 13 to 64.

The aim is to increase early diagnosis of the virus among the approximately 250,000 HIV-positive Americans who are unaware that they are infected.

Early diagnosis is key

Early diagnosis is considered critical for people infected with HIV to live longer and to stop the spread of AIDS.

There is sometimes a long period of time between when a person contracts HIV and when his or her immune system is so damaged by the virus that the person has the disease AIDS, which makes them vulnerable to deadly infections.

Every year, new treatments, called anti-retroviral therapies, are being discovered that can extend the life of someone with HIV by decades.

However, nearly 40 percent of individuals diagnosed with HIV are diagnosed within one year of developing AIDS -- too late for them to fully benefit from treatment.

In addition, people who don't know they have HIV are much more likely to pass it on to others.

"We urgently need new approaches to reach the quarter-million Americans with HIV who do not realize they are infected," CDC director, Dr. Julia Gerberding, said at a media briefing.

Making the tests easier

Previous guidelines had suggested that only high-risk individuals should be tested for the virus. However it was often too hard to determine who was at high risk, and doctors at regular check-ups didn't have time for a lengthy risk assessment test.

Procedures such as separate written consent and pre-test counseling have posed as barriers to the testing process, at times making it unfeasible to conduct the test in busy medical facilities.

Under the new recommendations, counseling will only be provided if an individual tests positive.

According to Dr. Timothy Mastro of the CDC, “studies have shown that when HIV testing is presented as routine, more patients accept testing and learn their HIV infection status.”

Routine but not mandatory

However, Dr. Gregg Pane who helped implement a routine testing program in Washington, D.C., noted that the new recommendations propose that the test is "routine" and not "compulsory".

“Patients will be given basic information and have the opportunity to ask questions before the test is carried out. It will only be suggested by medical practitioners at a routine medical check-up but there is an opt-out option.”

To make testing affordable and time effective, CDC has introduced "quick screening tests" which can be carried out in 20 minutes, and are 99.95 percent accurate.

Instead of drawing blood, nurses can just swab the inside of a patient's mouth.

More testing, better awareness

Health practitioners such as Pane hope that routine testing will help diminish the stigma attached to AIDS and make it more real to people who think the disease has nothing to do with them.

“The AIDS pandemic is not a problem related to a specific group of people. There are many ways one can contract the disease. While the stigma has reduced, education is still very necessary in HIV prevention,” he said.

-- *By Sehrish Shaban, NewsHour Extra*

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