

COLUMBIA SPECTATOR ARCHIVE

Columbia Daily Spectator, Volume CX, Number 34, 17 October 1985 — Twelve commonly asked questions on AIDS
[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Twelve commonly asked questions on AIDS

By BARCLAY PALMER
and MICHAEL FLEEMAN

1. WHAT IS AIDS?

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It destroys the body's ability to fight disease. People with AIDS are vulnerable to a variety of illnesses, most of which would not threaten anyone whose immune system is functioning normally, but which can be fatal to a person with AIDS.

People do not die of AIDS. Rather, people with AIDS die of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), rare cancers like Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) and opportunistic infections.

2. WHAT CAUSES AIDS?

A virus. Doctors believe the virus was introduced into the United States in the past decade. The virus thought to cause AIDS is usually called "human T-cell lymphotropic virus, type III" or HTLV-III." It attacks and destroys the body's immune system, leaving the body unable to fight off infections and diseases.

Infection by the virus does not always lead to AIDS. But studies have found that between five and 20 percent of those who carry the virus eventually develop the syndrome.

3. WHAT IS A.R.C., OR AIDS-RELATED COMPLEX?"

Most people infected with the HTLV-III virus don't get full-blown AIDS. About 90 percent will either remain healthy, but capable of transmitting the disease, or will develop "AIDS-Related-Complex."

A.R.C., according to Dr. Daniel William, instructor in clinical medicine at Columbia University, "can be thought of as lesser AIDS. People with A.R.C. have not had a life-threatening opportunistic infection, but get a combination of lesser symptoms, such as chronic herpes symptoms, thrush, shingles, a low count of "T-repressor" blood cells, abnormal immune tests, fever, night sweats, severe diarrhea, swollen lymph nodes, constant fatigue and other symptoms."

People with A.R.C. can develop AIDS, but Laura Pinsky, a coordinator of the Gay Health Advocates Project at Columbia University, stresses that these symptoms are "non-specific" to AIDS, and may not have anything to do with AIDS. "A vast number of students come into the Columbia Health Service with these symptoms, but they don't have AIDS," she said.

4. WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF AIDS?

People with full-fledged AIDS get a series of opportunistic

diseases and as the immune system is destroyed, even minor diseases become fatal.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has reported that about 85 percent of the AIDS patients studied have had one or both of two rare diseases: Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP), a parasitic infection of the lungs; and a type of cancer known as Kaposi's sarcoma (KS).

KS usually occurs anywhere on the surface of the skin or in the mouth. In early stages, it may look like a bruise or a blue-violet or brownish spot.

The spot or spots persist, and may grow larger. KS may spread to other organs of the body. PCP has symptoms similar to any other severe form of pneumonia.

5. IS AIDS AN EPIDEMIC?

Yes. The federal Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Ga., which declared the AIDS epidemic in 1981, reports that as of Sept. 30, 1985, there have been 13,611 Americans diagnosed with AIDS. Of these, 6,944 people have died.

In New York City, 4,457 people have been diagnosed with AIDS. More than 2,000 of them have died.

"It's a horrible epidemic. There's horrible suffering," said Dr. Stephen Caiazza, a member of the AIDS Advisory Council to Gov. Mario Cuomo. "There are not only the 13,000 or 14,000 reported cases of AIDS. In order to fall into that category, you have to have very specific, far-gone symptoms. The real number is probably a multiple of 20 or 30 times that."

There is no known cure. Everyone who has contracted AIDS has died within three years. And the number of people with AIDS is doubling more every six or eight months.

6. WHO GETS AIDS?

Ninety-four percent of the AIDS cases have been reported in the following groups of people;

- Sexually active homosexual and bisexual men: 73 percent.
- Present or past abusers of intravenous drugs: 17 percent.
- People with hemophilia or other coagulation disorders: one percent.
- Heterosexuals who have had sexual contact with member of a high-risk group: one percent. (Of the 137 heterosexuals who have contracted AIDS, 122 are women.)
- Persons with blood transfusions: two percent.

The remaining six percent don't fall into any of these groups. Researchers believe infants and children may have been exposed to HTLV-III before or during birth, shortly thereafter, or may have a history of blood transfusions. Some patients died before complete histories could be taken.

7. HOW DO PEOPLE GET AIDS?

The AIDS virus is passed from one person to another by

The AIDS virus is passed from one person to another by the exchange of bodily fluids. A high quantity of the virus is found in blood and semen. Smaller quantities have been found in saliva and to a lesser degree in tears.

Anal sex with multiple partners is most dangerous. The tissues of the rectum are particularly delicate and tend to be torn during anal sex. This allows the virus to pass directly from one partner's semen into the other's blood stream. French kissing and oral sex are also possible ways of transmission.

Intravenous drug users usually share hypodermic needles. The AIDS virus is transmitted from one person's blood stream to the other's by the intravenous needle. Habitual drug abuse itself suppresses the immune system, making the body more vulnerable.

8. CAN I GET AIDS FROM CASUAL CONTACT?

No. Doctors are insistent about this. The virus believed to cause AIDS is very delicate—it can be killed by soap and water and can't live in a dry environment. This makes such things as washed glasses and silverware, dry toilet seats and doorknobs safe. Skin is also an effective barrier to the disease.

“You have families where the mother has it, and one of the kids has it, but the other kids don't get it,” said one doctor. “They use the same towels, the same glasses, they wrestle with each other, but still, the kids don't get it.”

Doctors say if the disease were spread through casual contact, many more people would have it.

9. CAN WOMEN GET AIDS FROM MEN?

Yes. Women who have sex with bisexual men and IV drug users risk getting the AIDS virus. The virus can be passed from the man's semen through small breaks and cuts in the walls of the vagina. French kissing and oral sex are also possible routes of transmission.

“Sexual tissues are more sensitive and delicate,” said Dr. Mark Rubenstein of the Beth Israel Medical Center. “In sex, the rubbing of tissues causes micro-breaks in the skin which cause micro-exchanges in body fluids.”

10. CAN MEN GET AIDS FROM WOMEN?

Yes. The AIDS virus can be carried from the woman's vaginal secretions to open sores or cuts on a man's penis. Again, French kissing and oral sex can spread the disease.

11. ARE BLOOD BANKS SAFE?

Yes. The Greater New York Blood Bank tests all its blood for HTLV-III antibodies, as well as for hepatitis, syphilis, and other diseases. But even the best antibody tests are not 100 percent accurate (see related story on AIDS testing).

Blood Bank spokeswoman Jackie Adinano said donors are also asked to fill out a confidential questionnaire to deter-

mine if they are gay, hemophiliacs, or IV drug users.

“A lot of people are under pressure through their club or group or college to give blood,” Adinano said. “This way [with the questionnaire] they can still come in with everyone else, and their blood is pulled in the lab.”

12. WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I THINK MY ROOMMATE OR LOVER MIGHT HAVE AIDS?

Speak with him or her candidly about it. If AIDS is a strong possibility, advise him or her to see a doctor. The Gay Men’s Health Crisis and other organizations will make referrals (see box). If you just avoid the issue, you may create unnecessary fear or resentment without solving anything. Remember, you cannot get AIDS through casual contact. “So you don’t have to worry about your roommate,” said Pinsky.



SPECTATOR/ANDY LANDERS

HOT LINE: Volunteers from the Gay Men’s Health Crisis answer questions on a hot line number from their Chelsea office.