

What Happened to HIV?

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Jan 10 2010, 10:06 PM · **UPDATED**

The HIV virus and AIDS were discovered in the early 1980's and made a huge impact on the popular media and in the field of medicine. The disease caused a lot of emotional distress and carried a large stigma with it. Things have changed a lot since then. The disease is much more widespread, it is found in all types of people, in all countries, and of all sexual persuasions.

The epicenters of HIV are New York, LA, and San Francisco, so why would anyone here really care? The odds of being struck by lightning yearly are 1/700,000 and over a lifetime it is 1/3000, but would you walk around in a lightning storm? The odds of being beaten to death by a one-armed fruit bat are even less. Would you walk around carrying a fruit? But perhaps these alone are not compelling arguments. Let's look at HIV a bit closer.

Here are a few HIV facts. The HIV virus attacks the "T cells" of the immune system, our defense against the virus. When a large percentage of these cells have been destroyed, the victim is at risk for many kinds of infection and even cancer. HIV is much more treatable now. The medications of today work better and are much easier to take. In the past, several pills had to be taken several times a day. Now there are at least two treatments that involve one pill taken once a day. HIV is slowly climbing the ladder of causes of death world wide. It is now responsible for 2,800,000 deaths yearly or 4.9% of all deaths. This still pales next to things like heart disease, but it is many times what it was in the 1980's and 1990's. The life span of HIV infected people, who are treated appropriately, is still less than normal, but markedly better than it was two decades ago.

Still you may not be unconcerned about the virus, which does not seem to have a big hold in San Juan County. Yet, one of the most interesting developments in the field of HIV is the recent recommendation that all, yes all, people be screened for the disease at least once. The reason for this is that, in the past, people were screened based upon their risk factors and risk factors were primarily found by taking the patient's history, and people are dirty, rotten liars. But really, who could blame them? When you go to the doctor's office, you may have a stranger asking questions like, "How many sex partners have you had", and "Do you engage in ____ (fill in the blank) sex?" and "Have you ever used IV drugs?," and "What is your charge card number and security code, and oh, by the way, what is your spending limit?" Anybody would find these questions uncomfortable and some do not answer them. However, if you are not uncomfortable, please send the charge card information to the clinic, "Confidential, Care of Fruit Bat." HIV is more widespread than in the past. We have recently learned that many people who have no obvious risks for it can still be infected. Testing for HIV is now dramatically much easier, faster, and cheaper than in the past. Finally we know that one-armed fruit bats are much less common, rare really. Getting tested for HIV is really becoming a reasonable part of health management. If this is interesting to you, let us know. Bring your charge card.