

# WellNet Interactive's Healthy Newsletter

December 2011

## AIDS Awareness Month

### What is HIV/AIDS?

#### HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

- This virus can only infect human beings.
- HIV weakens your immune system by destroying important cells that fight disease and infection. A “deficient” immune system can’t protect you.
- A virus can only reproduce itself by taking over a cell in the body of its host.
- HIV is a lot like other viruses, including the “flu” and common cold. Your immune system can clear most viruses out of your body, however that isn’t the case with HIV—the human immune system can’t seem to get rid of it. Scientists are still trying to figure out why.
- HIV can hide for long periods of time in the cells of your body and it attacks a key part of your immune system (your T-cells or CD4 cells). You need these cells to fight infections and disease, but HIV invades them, uses them to make more copies of itself, and then destroys them. Over time, HIV can destroy so many of your CD4 cells that your body can no longer fight infections and diseases. When that happens, HIV infection can lead to AIDS.

#### AIDS (Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome)

- AIDS is not something you inherit from your parents. You *acquire* AIDS after birth.
- You get AIDS when your immune system is “deficient”, or isn’t working the way it should.
- AIDS is a syndrome, rather than a single disease, because it is a complex illness with a wide range of complications and symptoms.
- AIDS is the final stage of HIV infection. People at this stage of HIV disease have badly damaged immune systems, which put them at risk for opportunistic infections such as pneumonia, parasitic, viral and fungal infections, and some types of cancer.

### How Do You Get HIV/AIDS?

- HIV is found in specific human body fluids. If any of those fluids enter your body, you can become infected with HIV. HIV lives and reproduces in blood and other fluids such as semen, breast milk, vaginal fluids, and rectal mucous.

### Prevention

- **Every year, another 56,000 Americans become infected with HIV!**
- **Your risk for getting HIV—or transmitting it to others—is extremely low if:**
  1. You aren’t having intercourse of any kind
  2. You aren’t injecting drugs
  3. You aren’t pregnant
  4. You aren’t likely to have contact with infected body fluids in your workplace
- Protect yourself, know your own HIV status and well as your partner’s. Use protection correctly and consistently. And limit your number of sexual partners.
- If you believe you may have been exposed to HIV through unprotected intercourse, you can take medications that will lower your risk of getting HIV. The treatment is called PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis). But for PEP to work, you need to get medical care ASAP. The meds are most effective if you start them within **36 hours** of possible exposure. You can get PEP at hospital emergency rooms, urgent care clinics, or your local HIV clinic.
- If you are pregnant, or think you might be, please talk to a doctor or your local health department about getting an HIV test. If you are HIV-positive, there are medications that can dramatically reduce your chance of passing HIV to your baby. The sooner you take those medications, the more likely your baby will be protected.
- You can help prevent HIV infections by getting an HIV test. That’s because knowing your HIV status can keep you from accidentally passing the virus to someone else. Early treatment is another important part of prevention. If you test positive for HIV, you can get the medical care that will help keep you healthy. Treatment can make you less infectious to others, and help you to protect your partner.

