



Connie Beck, Director
Social Services | Public Health | Mental Health

news release

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State steps in as HIV concerns continue to rise

Two communicable disease specialists from the California Department of Public Health (CDPH) are in Humboldt County assisting local officials investigating an increase in the number of people newly diagnosed with HIV that was identified last month and has caused serious concern since then.

The specialists from CDPH arrived Monday after local health officials determined that there are at least 35 people in the community who may not know that they have been exposed to the virus and may be infected and contagious.

CDPH staff is augmenting local efforts to reach out to people recently diagnosed with HIV or syphilis to ensure that they are receiving effective treatment and support. They are also helping identify additional people who may have been exposed to HIV or syphilis, and linking them to testing, treatment and prevention services, such as pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV prevention.

Their efforts are supplementing those by the Public Health Branch of the Humboldt County Department of Health & Human Services (DHHS), who called attention to the HIV outbreak in April. Despite the collaboration, officials expect the number of people involved in the outbreak to rise due to increased testing and outreach among those who have been exposed.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, HIV spreads rapidly in areas with high rates of poverty, drug overdose deaths and hepatitis C, what local officials are calling "a perfect storm of risk factors" for Humboldt County.

Humboldt County Health Officer Dr. Donald Baird said he believes the high incidence of syphilis locally has also played a role in the spread of HIV, as syphilis significantly weakens the body's natural defenses to HIV and speeds its spread.

So far, all of the recent diagnoses have been associated with sexual transmission, but Baird and others fear the virus could also spread among

people who inject drugs and share needles, who are at high risk for the HIV infection.

With support from the state, local officials hope to avoid a repeat of a 2015 outbreak in Indiana that became one of the worst HIV outbreaks in the U.S. in recent years.

In Scott County, Ind., approximately 80 people tested positive for the virus before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, then the governor of Indiana, overrode state law to implement a syringe exchange program that ultimately stemmed the spread.

Humboldt County Public Health Director Michele Stephens noted the county's high risk profile, but pointed to local syringe services programs as an important preventive factor. The community-based programs provide referrals to treatment programs, information about overdose prevention, HIV and hepatitis C testing and syringe exchange and disposal.

"People always ask if syringe services programs like ours reduce the spread of disease," Stephens said, "and I always have to tell them yes, they do, even if it's impossible for me to show you the people who didn't get sick, who didn't spread the disease, who didn't die."

Officials advise those who believe they may have been exposed to HIV to contact the Public Health Clinic for consultation and free testing.

Particularly high-risk groups include gay, bisexual, and other men who have sex with men, along with people who have recently had a sexually transmitted infection, and those with multiple sex partners met through hook up apps or websites. People who inject drugs or have sex under the influence of alcohol or other drugs are also at increased risk.

Health officials advise getting tested and avoiding the following risk factors:

- Multiple or anonymous sex partners, especially those met through hookup apps or sites
- Unprotected sex
- Sex or needle-sharing with at-risk partners.

"The takeaway message is to get tested," said Baird. "All of these illnesses are treatable and preventable, so get tested and get healthy. We're here to help."

For more information or for free consultation and testing, contact the Public Health Clinic at 707-268-2108 or email freehivtest@co.humboldt.ca.us.

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