

NEWS RELEASE

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North Dakota Urges HIV Testing Amid Increase in Reported Infections

BISMARCK, N.D. – State health officials are advising high-risk audiences of the importance of HIV testing, along with information about preventative and treatment methods, given a recent spike in the number of HIV infections in North Dakota.

The public health alert comes in response to a recent and rapid increase in the number of HIV infections, specifically among an at-risk population of male same-sex partners who have anonymous, unprotected sex. Traditionally, the North Dakota Department of Health (NDDoH) interviews all individuals who test positive for HIV in order to identify any at-risk partners who also need testing. The growth of social media has also resulted in an increase of individuals meeting same-sex partners anonymously. This anonymity is a concern for NDDoH officials because patients are often unable to identify or contact these partners for follow-up.

Twenty-eight men whose primary risk factor for HIV infection is sex with male partners have been reported to have HIV in North Dakota since the beginning of 2016. Prior to 2016, North Dakota reported an average of eight new HIV cases of this type each year. Ten new HIV cases of this type have already occurred in 2017. Some of the cases are believed to be recent infections, within the last 12 months.

“We believe that this group may be at increased risk for HIV,” said Lindsey VanderBusch, NDDoH HIV, STD, TB and Viral Hepatitis Program Manager. “The increase in reports is concerning, so we strongly encourage all who don’t know their status to get tested.”

It is recommended that all people with risk factors be screened for HIV and other STDs at least annually, and every three to six months if engaged in unprotected sex, or sex with multiple partners. People diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection should have an HIV test with every new infection. Other risk factors for HIV infection include any person having unprotected sex (risk is increased with multiple sex partners) and injecting drugs.

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Acute HIV infection can present with symptoms. Symptoms may include fever, swollen glands, sore throat, rash, muscle and joint aches, and pains and headache. Symptoms usually present within 2-4 weeks from the time a person is exposed to the virus. All individuals at high risk for HIV infection should contact a health care provider about getting tested as soon as possible. If there is concern about the cost of testing, there are clinics that offer free or low-cost testing through the NDDoH's HIV Testing Program. Visit gettested.cdc.gov for clinic locations.

“The first step to taking care of your health is knowing your status. There are many resources for people who test positive for HIV to be able to manage their infection going forward,” VanderBusch said. “Also, for those who are negative and at high-risk, HIV preventive therapy known as PrEP would be an excellent option to prevent infection in the future.”

HIV Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) is a preventative medication, and if taken as directed, it can reduce the risk of HIV infection by more than 90 percent. PrEP is a safe and powerful tool that can be combined with condoms and other preventative methods to provide even greater protection than when used alone.

Please refer to the following websites for additional information: gettested.cdc.gov for HIV testing locations; preplocator.org for locations that supply PrEP; and www.ndhealth.gov/hiv or www.cdc.gov/hiv/ for more information about HIV.

For questions, contact VanderBusch, NDDoH, at 701.328.4555.

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