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## Many in U.S. With H.I.V. Don't Know It Or Seek Care

By LAWRENCE K. ALTMAN

About half of Americans infected with the AIDS virus either do not know they have it or do not receive the drugs that are improving the lives of other infected people, federal health officials said yesterday.

Also, many infected patients who do receive such drugs benefit less than they might because they start them too late, said the officials, from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The federal agency is responsible for tracking H.I.V., the AIDS virus.

An estimated 850,000 to 950,000 Americans are infected with H.I.V., the officials said at the ninth conference on retroviruses and opportunistic infections, in Seattle.

"We have more people living with H.I.V. in this country than ever before," said Dr. Harold W. Jaffe, who directs the disease centers' AIDS program, "but we have an unacceptable number of people not receiving treatment or prevention services" early enough, a problem that is disproportionately worse among blacks and Hispanics.

"The number of infected Americans who are living with H.I.V. has increased by about 50,000 in the last two years," Dr. Jaffe said.

About 670,000 Americans know they are infected, but an additional 180,000 to 280,000 have the virus but do not know it, according to a study reported by Dr. Patricia Fleming's team at the disease centers.

Dr. Fleming's study also found that of those who knew they were infected, about one-third, or 223,000, were not receiving care.

Her team used data from 25 states where H.I.V. infections are monitored to create a mathematical model to predict H.I.V. diagnosis in the remaining states. From the model, they also estimated that a quarter of infected people might not know they were infected.

A combination of factors underlie the problem, Dr. Jaffe said. They include younger people not having seen the epidemic in full force 15 years ago and falsely believing that current therapy can cure; younger people at risk who have grown tired of hearing warnings about AIDS; and drug advertisements that create misleading impressions by showing supposedly infected individuals looking perfectly healthy.

Dr. A. D. McNaghten's team from the disease centers found in a study conducted in 10 cities that 40 percent of infected Americans begin anti-H.I.V. therapy later than recommended. Federal guidelines say treatment generally should start when the number of CD-4 immune cells in the blood falls below 350, and definitely at 200, because delaying treatment past this point sharply increases the risk of death.

"A lot of AIDS deaths are occurring in people who come in off the street for care late, with very advanced disease," Dr. Jaffe said.

In an interview, he also said that 5 percent of AIDS cases were diagnosed within a month of death.

To improve care, the agency has begun public campaigns to increase the number of people who get H.I.V. tests. It is also urging wider use of a rapid H.I.V. test so individuals can get the results on the day they visit a clinic rather than waiting a week or longer, Dr. Jaffe said.

The Food and Drug Administration has licensed only one such rapid H.I.V. test, but a number of other rapid tests are sold elsewhere in the world, particularly in Africa, Dr. Jaffe said. He urged more companies to seek approval to market rapid tests in this country.

Also, the agency will urge hospitals to follow a guideline to make H.I.V. testing more of a routine part of health care. The recommendation, which was issued in 1993, calls on hospitals where at least 1 percent of the patient population has AIDS to consider offering H.I.V. testing to patients 15 to 54 years old.

"Virtually no hospital has done that," Dr. Jaffe said in an interview.

Although current figures cannot be directly compared to earlier ones because of the lack of continuing studies, there are hints of improvement, Dr. Fleming said.

A national study in 1996 found that of those who knew they were infected, about half were receiving care, whereas currently two-thirds of those who know they are infected are in care, Dr. Fleming said.

Still, she said, "we have a long way to go."

Dr. Constance Benson, an AIDS expert at the University of Colorado and scientific chairwoman of the retrovirus conference, said the willingness of patients to be tested had undergone pendulum swings that correlated with new developments about H.I.V. therapy.

People were more enthusiastic about testing after more potent anti-H.I.V. drugs were introduced in 1996, Dr. Benson said. But with the realization that anti-H.I.V. therapy is lifelong and often produces unwanted side effects that have raised concerns about increased risks of heart attacks, she said, many people have been less willing to be tested.

