



## **Sue Ann Says: Understand Your Risk of HIV and Prevent Infection**

You're a married woman or have been in a long-term relationship for years. Why should you worry about getting HIV, the virus that causes AIDS? Because, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the only diseases causing more deaths of women are heart disease and cancer; women account for more than one quarter of all new HIV/AIDS cases. Because HIV is right in your own backyard; every county in Wisconsin has reported HIV infections. Because, HIV is most definitely an urgent women's health concern.

Yet women today don't seem concerned about their HIV risk.

Not only is the rate of HIV/AIDS growing quickly among women; the vast majority of women are infected through heterosexual relations. The disease disproportionately affects women of color. Black women in the U.S. are 23 times more likely to be infected with HIV than white women and four times more likely to be infected than Hispanic women.

To learn more, I talked with Carol Calvin, RN, executive director of Comprehensive Health Education in Milwaukee. The agency provides HIV testing, prevention and education, community outreach, and support groups.

### **Why women are vulnerable**

The lack of HIV awareness puts women at increased risk. Carol explained that women are biologically vulnerable to HIV infection. The lining of the vagina offers more surface area to exposure, making women twice as likely as men to become infected through vaginal intercourse. Preexisting sexually transmitted diseases greatly increase the risk of HIV infection.

Women often don't recognize their sexual partner's risk factors – and thus, their own risks. This is especially true of women in a monogamous or long-term relationship. But symptoms of HIV infection often don't show up for 10 years or more. A sexual partner of many years may have the infection and not even know it. Many women are afraid to ask their partner about faithfulness and past risky sexual behavior. In addition, women may be reluctant to insist on a condom or say no to unprotected sex for fear of rejection or hurting their partner's feelings.

Alcohol and drug use, poverty and other socioeconomic stressors also are related to higher HIV risk.

### **Prevention saves lives**

The only safe sex is no sex. But if you are a sexually active woman, you can take steps to protect yourself. You can also educate your children. Carol offered these suggestions:

- Use condoms, even if you are in a monogamous relationship. Many women infected with HIV/AIDS thought they were in a committed relationship.
- Know your risk factors and those of your partner. Ask your partner about his sexual history and drug use.

- Get tested and ask your partner to be tested. Some medical professionals still have preconceived notions about who should be screened for HIV. But many healthcare advocates now are suggesting that HIV testing should be a routine screening exam for every sexually active patient.
- Do not use illegal drugs taken by injection. About 13 percent of HIV/AIDS infections are caused by sharing needles – and sharing an HIV infection.
- Talk with your children about safe sex and drug use. This discussion can be based on both medical risks and your values.

### **Mother-to-child HIV infection**

Women infected with HIV/AIDS can pass the virus on to their children during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding, Carol told me. Talk with your doctor about your risk factors before becoming pregnant. Consider being tested for HIV/AIDS if there is any possibility you could be infected. If you have the HIV virus, medications and specific delivery procedures can help prevent transmission to your baby.

### **Early diagnosis and treatment is crucial**

HIV/AIDS used to be a certain death sentence. With recent treatment advances, that's no longer true. "Early treatment is highly beneficial. That's why it's so important to be tested," Carol told me. "It's possible to live 25 years or more with the disease if it is caught and treated early."

### **Be an advocate**

Beyond protecting yourself and your family, what can you do to help stop the spread of HIV/AIDS? Educate yourself and help raise awareness. Dispel the myths of HIV infection. Any of us could be infected. Raise your voice in support of women's health education and outreach. Because it all begins with a healthy woman.

Yours in good health,



Sue Ann Thompson  
Founder & President  
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*The Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation (WWHF) is a statewide non-profit organization whose mission is to help Wisconsin women and their families reach their healthiest potential. WWHF provides programs and conducts educational forums that focus on prevention, early detection, and connecting individuals to resources; produces and distributes the most up-to-date health education and resource materials; and, awards grants and scholarships to women health researchers and related community non-profits. Your donations help WWHF reach women all over Wisconsin with the information, resources and tools they need to be healthy. To make a donation or to learn more about WWHF, visit [wwhf.org](http://wwhf.org) or call 1-800-448-5148.*