

BUCKS COUNTY Courier Times



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HEALTH

Region leads U.S. in new HIV and AIDS cases

HIV and AIDS in Bucks and Montgomery counties from 1980 to 2008

County	Presumed alive	Dead
<i>HIV not progressed to AIDS</i>		
Bucks	260	16
Montgomery	469	25

<i>AIDS</i>		
County	Presumed alive	Dead
Bucks	344	417
Montgomery	442	564

<i>Total AIDS cases (since 1980)</i>	
County	Cases
Bucks	761 cases
Montgomery	1006 cases*

* Montgomery County has the fourth highest amount of AIDS cases in the state.
Source: Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2008 HIV/AIDS Surveillance Summary Report

While newly diagnosed AIDS cases in Pennsylvania peaked in the early 1990s and have fallen steadily since, HIV-only infection rates continue to rise in the state.

By **JO CIAVAGLIA**
STAFF WRITER

People don't worry about HIV and AIDS as much as they once did, but that doesn't mean the health epidemic is over. Just the opposite is true locally.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has identified the Philadelphia region as the place where new HIV and AIDS cases are growing fastest in the United States.

Philadelphians are being infected at a rate five times the national average, according to the CDC. The rate of new HIV infections among Philadelphia area residents was 114 per 100,000 people age 13 and older in 2006; the

national average was 23 people per 100,000. "We are explosively ahead," Mary Beth Swan said. She's the coordinator of HIV and AIDS programs for the Family Service Association of Bucks County.

Today more than 100 educators, health and human services professionals from as far south as Maryland are gathering in Bensalem to hear about the latest trends involving HIV, AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, at a conference sponsored by Family Service Association, the Bucks County Health Department and Bucks County Drug and Alcohol Commission.

In the nearly 30 years since the CDC first recognized the HIV and AIDS viruses and the cause, the disease has morphed from a quick killer to a chronic illness, which brings new challenges involving treatment and funding.

Other aspects of the virus, though, haven't changed, such as misinformation about how it's spread, AIDS/HIV advocates say.

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HIV only infection in Pennsylvania mode of transmission, 2002-2008

transmission mode	2002	2008
Male-male sexual contact	27%	33%
Intravenous drug use	23%	10%
Heterosexual contact	34%	48%

Total HIV-positive only Pennsylvanians alive as of Dec. 31, 2007: 13, 241

* Other modes of transmission reflected 10% or less of cases.
Source: Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2008 HIV/AIDS Surveillance Summary Report

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BUCKS COUNTY COURIER TIME

Cases

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Among the more disturbing trends seen locally are that more people waited until they developed full-blown AIDS before they were diagnosed, risking their health and potentially infecting others. HIV is also spreading fastest among people who don't think of themselves as high risk, a group that prevention efforts have not traditionally targeted.

HIV isn't the only concern for public health officials in the Philadelphia area. They are also seeing increases in other sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis, the most common secondary sexually transmitted disease found in HIV-positive individuals. Individuals infected with HIV and syphilis are more likely to become sicker, faster.

ALIVE AND WELL

Christopher was born in 1986, the year after the death of actor Rock Hudson, the first major public figure to reveal he had AIDS.

Five days before his 22nd birthday in 2008, Christopher received the results of his annual HIV test. He was positive.

"I assumed I was going to die," said Christopher, who didn't want his last name used. "In school, I was never taught about HIV and AIDS. It was, don't get chlamydia and don't get pregnant. I never really heard anything about it."

Christopher will appear at today's conference on a panel of HIV and AIDS clients from the Family Service Association. He'd like to be more open with people about his diagnosis, but ignorance about the disease prevents him from doing that, he said.

Misinformation about HIV and AIDS is alive and well, despite the massive public education campaigns during the late 1980s and 1990s, Swan and others said.

Swan has heard stories from clients whose friends or families who wrongly believe the virus can be spread through handling dirty laundry, dishes and glasses and other casual contact. (HIV is transmitted through direct contact with bodily fluids.) Some clients are so fearful of people finding out they're HIV-positive, they opt out of employer health benefits, Swan said.

"In some regards, the scarlet letter still exists, but it is spelled AIDS," Swan said.

HIV infection is most effectively treated when caught early, which is why public health professionals consider regular HIV testing critical among high-risk individuals. Despite that, the Bucks County Department of Health says 11 percent of individuals tested for HIV never return to get their results.

Health care providers cannot reveal HIV test results over the phone, under Pennsylvania law.

Another disturbing trend that the Family Service Association is seeing more frequently is clients who learn their HIV status when they're diagnosed with AIDS, when the

More than 1 million U.S. residents are HIV-positive, but one in five of them don't know it, according to the CDC. While more effective drug treatments are keeping HIV-positive people healthier longer than ever, more than 14,000 people with AIDS in the U.S. still die each year, according to the CDC.

In Pennsylvania, newly diagnosed AIDS cases peaked in the early 1990s and have fallen steadily since then, according to state health statistics. But HIV-only rates rose from 886 new cases in 2002 to nearly 1,400 in 2008. An estimated 13,241 Pennsylvanians were HIV-positive in December 2007, according to the state.

The number of new HIV-only cases at least doubled in Bucks and Montgomery counties — from eight to 24 and 27 to 52, respectively — between 2002 and 2008.

Most Pennsylvanians were infected through sexual contact. In the Philadelphia region, including Bucks County, more than 80 percent of new HIV-only cases were sexually transmitted with heterosexual contact responsible for more than half of the infections in 2008, according to state data.

"Initially there was a very strong drive and push for education. There was a lot of media attention. Hollywood took it on as a point of interest," said Swan of Family Service Association. "Perhaps because of the attention it received in the earlier years ... people think it's not as pervasive as it is."