Women and HIV – protecting yourself and your baby: a NetWellness column

By Plain Dealer guest columnist
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HIV has crossed multiple cultural, gender, and geographical boundaries in the course of the last 25 years since the first outbreaks in San Francisco’s homosexual communities.

It is not just a man’s problem or a homosexual issue, but a disease that has had a significant impact on men and women alike, across sexual preferences and cultures.

The number of men and women living in the United States with HIV are now equal.

The majority of new HIV cases among young women are contracted through unprotected heterosexual sex.

Risk factors for women

Women are more vulnerable to most sexually transmitted illnesses (STIs) than men, including HIV, because of differences in biology, as well as the power dynamics between men and women in sexual relationships. In addition, research appears to point towards differences in the progression of the disease, as well as differences in markers of HIV activity, and differences in
adverse events to therapy between men and women.

Fortunately, HIV drugs seem as effective in women as in men.

Facts about HIV and women

- HIV is the third most-deadly disease for women in the United States
- HIV is the leading cause of death among young African-American women between the ages of 25-34 years
- More than 25% of new cases diagnosed every year are in women
- Women are eight times more likely to contract HIV than men during unprotected heterosexual sex

Prevention

Get informed

By educating yourself about your risks and the steps you need take in order to protect yourself from HIV, you are in a better position to take an active part in preventing infection. Make sure that you know the risk factors for contracting HIV in order to avoid these risks and make sure that you are not exposed to these risks through your partner.

Get tested

Make sure that you get tested regularly for HIV, especially if you are regularly exposed to risk factors for acquiring HIV. You should always know your health status as well as your partner's status. Remember, people with HIV are frequently unaware of their status because they may feel and look healthy for years.

Reduce transmission risks

Women are eight times more likely than men to contract HIV during unprotected heterosexual sex. It is important to protect yourself from HIV and other STIs by staying informed, getting regular testing, knowing your partner's status, and practicing safe sex. Here are ways to reduce your risk of transmission:

- Have a low number of sex partners
- Practice safe sex: Always use a condom regardless of the perceived health status of the partner
- Know your HIV status and the HIV status of any of your partners, and get tested for HIV regularly.
- Know the risk factors for contracting HIV and protect yourself against them.
Stop drug abuse

According to the CDC, 1 in 5 new cases of HIV every year amongst adolescent and adult females is from drug use. Substance abuse, both injected and non-injected, increases your risk of HIV.

- Avoid sharing needles and drug paraphernalia that might be contaminated with HIV
- Women who sell or trade sex for drugs of any sort are at higher risk of contracting HIV
- Women and men taking crack cocaine are also at higher risk of acquiring HIV, likely due to associated high risk behaviors
- There is an increased chance of getting HIV when engaging in high risk behavior such as unprotected sex while under the influence of drugs and alcohol
- Find out about Needle Exchange Programs in your area

HIV treatment

Treatment options and complications

Treatment options for HIV are the same for men and women. Luckily, treatment works very well and similarly in both genders. However, the toxicity, possible side effects, and blood levels of the drug vary between genders. Nevertheless, there is no difference between genders with respect to the effectiveness of the drug therapy.

HIV and Pregnancy

An estimated 120,000 to 160,000 women are living with HIV in the United States with between 6,000 and 7,000 of these women giving birth annually. Without treatment, up to 25% of the children delivered by these women will be born with HIV. However, treatment before and after delivery and can reduce the chance of transmission from mother to child down to 1%.

All women who plan on getting pregnant or are already pregnant should be tested for HIV to ensure appropriate prenatal care and prophylactic treatment is administered to the mother to reduce the risk of transmission to the unborn child.

Getting pregnant with HIV

If you or your partner has HIV, and you decide to have a child, there are steps that can be taken to minimize the risk of transmitting/getting HIV to/from your partner as well as to your unborn child. There risks are much higher in couples where the woman is negative and the man is positive for HIV. Here are some steps you can take to reduce your risks of spreading HIV:
Consult with your physician before attempting to get pregnant

Only have unprotected sex during the time of the month when the woman is fertile. This time is usually about 2 weeks before her period. An ovulation kit can also help you determine this time period. Discuss with an HIV specialist the possibility of providing HIV prophylaxis for the uninfected partner during this time

Have a viral load test (or your partner's test) when you try to conceive.

Treat any STIs or vaginal infections before making an attempt to have a baby

Discuss with your physician methods of additional precautions, including sperm washing

**Prenatal care and treatment**

HIV Transmission from a mother to her child during pregnancy, labor, delivery, or breastfeeding is called Perinatal Transmission, and is the most common way for a child to acquire HIV. Risk of HIV transmission can be decreased from 25% to 1% with the appropriate treatment and intervention during pregnancy. By reducing risk factors during the prenatal period, taking additional medications during the last few months of pregnancy, during labor and delivery, and testing and treating newborn babies often after birth, the risk of transmission from the mother to the child is significantly reduced. Reduce risk factors for transmission from mother to child with these guidelines:

Try to get early prenatal care to ensure the best possible care for both mother and child. Some studies showed an increased risk of transmission if pregnant women have vitamins deficiencies

Make sure the risks factors are well controlled.

Always avoid smoking, alcohol, elicit drugs and other substances that could be harmful to your unborn child.

Take antiretroviral therapy during the pregnancy and continue the treatment after delivery for the newborn. Compliance with each dose of antiretrovirals is key to the efficacy of the regimen

Avoid breastfeeding

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