

Florida Faces A Rising Tide Of HIV Infection

BY MARY SHEDDEN



Everyone thinks HIV happens to someone else.

It only infects men who are having sex with men, they say. Or HIV drug users.

And while that still accounts for about half of all people infected, those who are being diagnosed with this serious sexually transmitted disease don't fall into simple categories. They're young and old, straight, gay and transgender, of every race.

A total of **5,377 Floridians were diagnosed with HIV** in 2013, according to the Florida Department of Health. That number is higher than anywhere else in the nation.

Here's some perspective. When it comes to the presence of HIV in Florida, the state's six largest metropolitan areas could be states unto themselves.

If Miami-Fort Lauderdale-West Palm Beach were a state, it would rank sixth nationally in the number of new cases. The Tampa Bay and Central Florida metro regions each saw more new cases than two dozen other states.

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The number of HIV infections is significant because Florida is the third most populated state. But it also can provide clues as to who most of these newly diagnosed residents are. **Health News Florida** over the coming week will be sharing the stories of these people and their communities who include:

- **Older Floridians** accounted for 23 percent of the new infections in 2013. Of all cases of HIV in the state, 44 percent are 50 years of age or older.
- **Young people, ages 13 to 24.** Men this age who have sex with other men account for more than two-thirds of all new reports of HIV infection, the Department of Health reports. Doctors who work with this population also say that 60 percent of infected teens and young adults have no idea they are HIV-positive.
- **Transgender women.** There's little data identifying those in the transgender community living with HIV, but the risks are significant, from homelessness to sex work.
- **African Americans.** While this group accounts for 15 percent of the state's population, it disproportionately represents Floridians living with HIV, at 48 percent of cases. Stigma and prejudices linger around the disease within the black community, making testing and treatment difficult.
- **Men who have sex with men.** The gay community has been living with the realities of HIV infection since the disease emerged in the 1980s. And while it's at the forefront of many prevention efforts, infections persist.

Across Florida and the nation, public health educators continue to preach the importance of HIV treatment and prevention. That includes **National HIV Testing Day**, which is being recognized across Florida next week with free testing opportunities.

From a clinical standpoint, if HIV is identified early, there are medications that can transform the illness into a chronic disease. Treatments also can help keep HIV infection at bay for the **sexual partners of people** who are infected.

But that can't happen unless someone is tested and diagnosed, said Dr. Diane Straub, chief of adolescent medicine at the University of South Florida and medical director at the Ybor Youth Clinic, which specializes in treating LGBT Youth.

"There are so many people that don't know they are infected...The onset is usually about a decade before you start getting sick from it," she said.

That's a lot of opportunity for unprotected sex, and placing other sexual partners at risk, she said.

“So that's years of exposing your partners to potentially acquiring HIV when you didn't know you were infected.”

Health News Florida intern Megan Milanese contributed to this report. Mary Shedden is a reporter for [WUSF](#) in Tampa. WUSF is part of [Health News Florida](#), which receives support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.