



SOUTHWEST PUBLIC HEALTH DISTRICT

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June 10, 2009
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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National HIV Testing Day underscores importance of early diagnosis and treatment

Early HIV diagnosis is critical to ensure people who are infected can fully benefit from available live-saving treatments – yet nearly 40 percent of people with HIV are not diagnosed until they have already developed AIDS.

“We want to raise awareness on June 27, National HIV Testing Day, about how vital it is to get tested and know your HIV status,” explained Southwest Health District HIV/AIDS Program Manager Chanel Scott-Dixon. “All too often, patients don’t get diagnosed until years after they have become infected. Catching it early and starting treatment at once can save heartache down the road.”

In observance of National Testing Day, Public Health will offer free HIV testing June 27 from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Dawson at the Dawson Public Safety Building. The building is located at 432 Crawford Street directly behind the police station.

“The test is fast as well as free,” Scott-Dixon said. “It takes about 20 minutes.”

Since anyone can catch HIV/AIDS, the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommend that everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 be tested as a routine part of their medical care, she said.

“It is also important for pregnant women to be tested early in each pregnancy,” noted Southwest Health District Health Director Dr. Jacqueline Grant. “That will help eliminate the spread of HIV to infants.”

Southwest District’s HIV AIDS program offers education, testing, counseling, contact and partner identification, notification and referral for treatment. “Our services are offered through our 14 county health departments,” Grant said.

She stressed that patient information such as test results and health status are protected from public scrutiny. “Patients and prospective patients can be reassured that we take patient confidentiality extremely seriously. We don’t want anyone to use privacy concerns as an excuse to avoid HIV screening, education or treatment.”

Risk factors for HIV transmission include:

- Use of injected drugs or steroids during which equipment (such as needles, syringes, cotton water) and blood were shared with others
- Unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex (sex without using condoms) with men who have sex with men, multiple partners or anonymous partners
- Exchanging sex for drugs or money

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- Receiving a diagnosis of, or treatment for, hepatitis, tuberculosis (TB) or a sexually transmitted disease (STD) such as syphilis
- Received a blood transfusion or clotting factor during 1978–1985
- Having unprotected sex with someone who has any of the risk factors listed above

“The only way to know you are infected is to be tested,” Scott-Dixon said. “You cannot rely on symptoms alone because many people who are infected with HIV do not have symptoms for many years. Someone can look and feel healthy but can still be infected. In fact, one quarter of the HIV-infected persons in the United States do not know that they are infected.”

For more information about HIV/AIDS, go to www.southwestgeorgiapublichealth.org or contact your local health department.

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