

40 years later, HIV is no longer a death sentence. But misconceptions remain

Opinion: HIV is not only a livable condition now, but also preventable. Yet Maricopa County has among the highest rates of new infections in the country.

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Published 6:00 a.m. MT Jun. 22, 2021

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Maricopa County has one the highest rates of new HIV infections in the nation. It's important to talk openly about risk, testing, preventive medication and staying on treatment.

I encountered my first HIV patient as a young medical student in Los Angeles in the early 1980s. He was a man in his 20s sick with fever and swollen lymph nodes.

I felt humbled and saddened in the face of a terrifying new disease we didn't understand and didn't know how to treat. He succumbed to AIDS not long after, becoming one of the millions globally whose lives have been cut short by the epidemic.

Today, when I train new health care providers at Valleywise Community Health Center – McDowell, it's hard to convey how awful those days were during the early years of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States. There are books, plays and movies that portray the era, but if you didn't live through it, it's difficult to impart the misery and despair we all felt – providers and patients alike.

Prevention is better, but there are too many new infections

Thankfully, HIV is no longer a death sentence. There is still no cure, but newer antiretroviral drugs have made HIV a survivable condition treatable with a single daily pill. And if one medication doesn't work or causes side effects, there are many other options.

What's more, preventive medicine is available for those at risk of contracting HIV. Approved in the past decade, [pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PreP](#), has dramatically changed the prevention landscape for HIV. It's a daily pill that can reduce the risk of the virus establishing a permanent infection.

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Yet the more things change, some things sadly remain the same in HIV transmission.

Today, Maricopa County is one of 48 counties across the United States with the [highest rates of new infections](#). More than 11,000 individuals in [Maricopa County](#) are living with HIV.

Many of those newly infected, particularly younger LGBTQ patients, don't know about the utter horror of the early days, and simply don't view HIV as a big deal. To those in their teens, 20s and 30s, the early 1980s is outside of their lifetimes. Further, many heterosexual patients still think of HIV as a gay disease rather than an STD that anyone can get.

We need open dialogue about risk, testing and treatment

Furthermore, 40 years after the first HIV/AIDS in the US, we're still dealing with shame and stigma. Unfortunately, an infection that any of us can encounter is still perceived by some as a scarlet letter, rather than simply the luck of the draw that

intimacy can bring. Only through open dialog about risk, testing, PrEP and staying on treatment can we be safe from HIV.

When I counsel patients today, it's a much different conversation than in the 1990s when I treated HIV patients at the LA County Medical Center. Back then, it was reassurance about fighting a terminal disease; today's it's optimism about a long and full life –if a patient takes their medication every day.

I remember a home visit with a very ill young man in the early '90s who looked at the full moon outside the window and remarked, "I don't think I'm going to live to see the next moon." A month later I smelled every bloom in the hospital rose garden on my way into the hugs that greeted me in the clinic the day after attending his death at home.

It's just one of the many stories of loss and coping that those of us impacted by the AIDS pandemic carry in our hearts forever.

No one needs to be infected with HIV

Going forward, however, we can reduce and prevent new infections in Maricopa County through education around safer sex, the use of PreP and helping HIV-positive patients stay in care with suppression of their viral infection. At Valleywise Health, we treat more than 4,000 patients living with HIV, and provide testing and PrEP to those at risk for acquiring the infection.

It's important to recognize the 40th anniversary of the first AIDS cases in the U.S. and appreciate that nowadays *no one* needs to get infected with HIV.

For our HIV-positive patients, the history begins when they get their HIV diagnosis –and that's when we'll be there to offer understanding and support, for many decades to come. For those not yet infected we implore you to reach out to us so we can help you stay HIV uninfected.