

HIV rates increasing in Salt Lake County

Limited concern and lack of dialogue worry officials

By Clayton Norlen

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The Salt Lake Valley Health Department says that HIV rates have been steadily increasing in the valley for the past three years and preliminary records suggest 2009 won't be an exception.

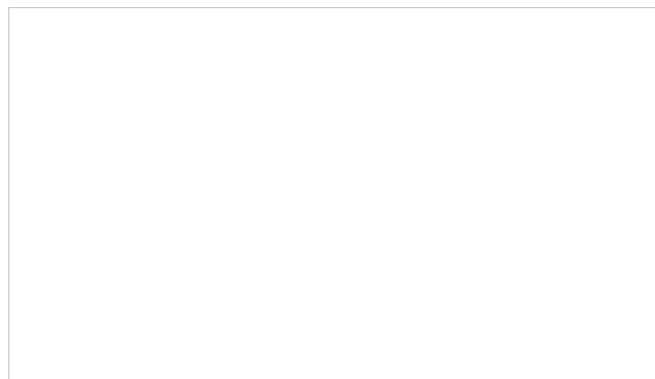
Health officials worry that a lack of conversation and limited concern, especially among sexually active young adults, is what is really driving the increased rates of infection.

"Rates grow because there is a lack of conversation around HIV and what the risk factors are," said Stan Penfold, the executive director of the Utah AIDS Foundation. "It is really easy to compartmentalize because of the stigma associated with HIV, but the average age of infection is getting younger and younger."

HIV was first identified in the United States in 1981. After several years scientists developed a test for the virus and determined actions people could take to protect themselves. The Centers for Disease Control report that HIV rates fell dramatically in 1996. However, today, more people than ever before are infected.

For many under the age of 25 AIDS and HIV have been a part of global life since they were born, yet, Penfold said, this has escalated complacency with the disease and left many comfortable with its existence.

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On Saturday, the United States observed National HIV testing day, but Penfold said stemming the growth of new infections requires constant awareness.

"We've got a younger population that doesn't understand HIV or how to prevent its spread," Penfold said.

The CDC estimates that about 1 million people in the United States are living with HIV or AIDS. About one quarter of these people do not know that they are infected, ultimately leaving others at risk.

"It's a matter of awareness," said Lynn Beltran, STD and HIV program manager for the Salt Lake County Health Department. "Misconceptions are there, some people think that HIV doesn't exist, or that there is a cure."

No cure for HIV or AIDS exists and there is no indication that a cure or vaccine will be developed in the future. Antivirals are available to help manage the development of AIDS, yet they cost an estimated \$1,500 to \$2,000 a month.

Marin Kohler of Holladay, a recent high school graduate, said that many of her friends and peers have a false impression of the virus and how it spreads, such as the wrong belief that AIDS only affects people in Africa, she said.

She also doubted that much of her knowledge came from sex education classes in high school, but instead said most of it came from her parents.

"Even if you don't believe in premarital sex, you should talk to your parents about your sexual health," Kohler said. "It's scary to talk about sex, sure, but

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