

The Web: Net slowing spread of HIV

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The Internet is helping staunch the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, experts tell UPI's The Web.

A report last week by the San Francisco-based Kaiser Family Foundation indicated that gays who are HIV-positive have been using online dating services to find new sex partners who are similarly afflicted.

"The dating practice, which is called 'sero-sorting,' involves men choosing sex partners based on their common HIV serostatus, which refers to the presence of antibodies to a particular infectious agent in the blood," according to the Kaiser report.

A report released by the government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta recently found San Francisco's HIV-incidence rate among "men having sex with men," or MSM, has been cut in half during the last four years. The study, based on a survey of 365 MSM who were tested in the city by the bay, found a yearly incidence rate of 1.2 percent. City epidemiologists previously estimated the rate of incidence at 2.2 percent.

Gay-oriented Web sites, where posters list HIV-positive or negative data about themselves, may have contributed to the reduction in AIDS cases in San Francisco.

San Francisco has historically been seen as a ground zero of sorts for AIDS trends, a predictor of what will happen in the future in other cities with large homosexual populations.

According to the CDC, the city with the highest incidence of new infection among men who have sex with men was Baltimore, with 8 percent. Miami was the runner-up with 2.6 percent, followed by New York with 2.3 percent and Los Angeles with 1.4 percent. The report's preliminary estimates were based on HIV tests conducted on nearly 2,000 men from June 2004 to April 2005.

The Internet is also being used -- anonymously -- by gays and straights who are seeking testing to determine if they have been infected with a sexually transmitted disease.

One such Web-site producer is InforMed Center, based in Cleveland, a medical service that helps provide anonymous STD testing to help prevent the spread of diseases. "A customer worried that he or she has been infected or those who want to prove that they have not been infected can visit www.STDWeb.com," said spokeswoman Kim Pupillo. "More people are apt to take the test and prevent the spread of disease because they do not have to give their names to the lab that conducted the screenings."

According to Pupillo, the Web site contains a list of screenings performed at labs across the country that have contracted with InforMed Center to provide the service. "The customer simply contacts the toll-free number on the Web site, requests the tests they are interested in receiving and provides billing information," said Pupillo. "The customer service representative will handle the rest -- including making sure a lab close in proximity to the customer receives a requisition order. The requisition order, which is signed off on by an M.D., does not need to contain the customer's name."

Another use of the Web is for dissemination of disease-prevention information.

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center, based in New York City, has produced a Web site -- www.gaycenter.org -- that offers "a crystal meth information and referral section," said Anthony Ramos, director of communications for the center. "The site was designed to create public awareness of the crystal meth epidemic, with a particular emphasis on HIV prevention."

The illegal street drug crystal methamphetamine is said to be commonly used by homosexuals to loosen sexual inhibitions.

Ramos said a recent study in New York City observed that men who tested positive for HIV -- even though they thought they were negative -- had 11 times more unprotected receptive anal sex while "high on meth" than those who were confirmed to be HIV-negative.

"Since February 2005, www.gaycenter.org has received about 8,000 page impressions for the crystal meth Web pages, which means that an average of 400 unique visitors come to the site each month," said Ramos.

The center recently presented its Web-based crystal-interventions model at the First National Conference on Methamphetamine, HIV and Hepatitis 2005: Science and Response in Salt Lake City, Utah, on Aug. 21, said Ramos.

"We are collaborating with David Contois from www.knowcrystal.org in San Diego and with Gary Leigh from www.lifeormeth.com in England to bring our Web survey to their constituents. David's group has a Southern California following and Gary's services in England, Europe and Australia with his Web site and related educational outreach services," said Ramos.

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