

Donating Blood: Should You or Not?

People at increased risk for AIDS should continue to refrain from donating blood, and should not use blood donations as a method of having the antibody test done.

For several years, the Red Cross and other blood banks have asked that people belonging to groups with higher incidences of HIV infection not donate blood. Gay and bisexual men, IV drug users, and sexual partners of people in these groups, among others, have had an excellent record of voluntary compliance with this request.

Despite the fact that donated blood is now being tested to detect antibodies to HIV, the need for not donating remains. Likewise, a blood donation center is not an appropriate means for learning antibody status.

The reason for this policy is the continuing need to keep the blood supply as free as possible from HIV infection. Because the test includes some false negatives, and because there is a lag time which varies from several weeks to several months for the development of antibodies after exposure to the actual virus, the test is not foolproof. To keep as much of this blood as possible from sneaking through, the need for voluntary compliance remains.

The Alternative Test Site system (ATS) was set up to provide a way for people who wanted to know their antibody status to do so without using blood donation centers. Because of the counselling, information and anonymity provisions of ATS, it is a far better way to be tested.

One key difference is that blood tested by the Red Cross is identified by name. Although they have an excellent record of maintaining confidentiality and a very elaborate security mechanism to guard names, it is not an anonymous system.

"Vermont has such an excellent alternative test site system with safeguards built in at every step, that no one who thinks they may have been exposed to the

virus should even have to think about putting others at risk of infection by donating blood to find out their test results"

said Terje Anderson, Executive Director of Vermont C.A.R.E.S.

The Red Cross has taken great pains to develop deferral systems which are comfortable and non-embarrassing for people at risk. Rather than asking "are you gay? do you use drugs?", they provide a list of categories of people who are asked to not donate. If you fall into one of those categories, you simply check the box at the bottom which indicates that you should not donate. No big fuss is made, and no attention is drawn to you.

Recently they have also developed a mechanism for people who come under pressure to donate in a group setting (an office, for example). Recognizing that it could be difficult for someone to decline to donate in front of a group of co-workers

HIV Positive Support Group

Have you tested positive on the HIV antibody test? Do you feel alone and isolated because of it? Do the rest of your friends not really understand what it feels like? Would you like to talk with other people who are going through the same thing?

Vermont C.A.R.E.S. sponsors a support group for people with HIV positive tests. It meets weekly, and is open to anyone who has tested positive. Members, in complete confidentiality, meet and talk about the issues we face living seropositive. The environment is supportive, honest, and friendly.

If you are interested in joining the group, or have other concerns about testing positive that you would like to talk with someone about, contact Terje at Vermont C.A.R.E.S. at 863-2437.



AZT Heralds Many Questions

BY TERJE ANDERSON

Many headlines heralded the FDA's approval this spring of azidothymidine (AZT) as an AIDS treatment drug.

The decision, which was made rapidly after clinical trials showed dramatic improvements among many people with AIDS who were being treated with AZT experimentally, has prompted many to think that a cure is at hand. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

AZT, manufactured by Burroughs Wellcome Co., a major pharmaceutical firm, is the first drug for treatment of AIDS which was deemed effective enough to be widely used.

AZT seems to interfere with the ability of HIV to survive and reproduce in the

immune system. Although it does not rebuild a damaged immune system, some patients taking AZT have shown dramatic improvement in measurements of immune system function. Clinical trials reported fewer opportunistic infections and deaths in a group taking AZT than in a control group given a placebo. (The trial was stopped after preliminary results became available - it was viewed as unethical to continue giving placebos to some while the drug seemed to show effectiveness. The Food and Drug Administration "fast-tracked" approval to make AZT available outside of an experimental setting.)

The decision to approve was not met with a universally positive reception. Among the questions which arose were the toxicity

and friends, they provide a box which can be checked in private which says, in essence, "you may draw my blood for appearances sake, but please throw it away without testing it after I leave here." It is an innovative and important step in protecting both individual privacy and the blood supply.

"Blood banks and high risk communities have worked hard to understand each other and build a system of voluntary deferrals" says Anderson, "We need to work to continue that good relationship, and to ask high risk individuals to continue to defer from donating blood and from using blood banks as a testing means."

For more information on blood donations and testing contact:

Vermont C.A.R.E.S. (802) 863-2437
Vermont AIDS Hotline 1-800-882-AIDS
Red Cross (802) 658-6400

Worried Well

Are you worried about AIDS? Do you think about it all of the time? Has it gotten in the way of enjoying your life? Do you have trouble adjusting to changes in your sex life that AIDS may require? Do you sometimes convince yourself that you have AIDS, even if it is just a cold?

AIDS is frightening, and many of us deal with AIDS anxiety as part of our daily lives. To help deal with those fears Vermont C.A.R.E.S. will be offering a "Worried Well" support group beginning in late October.

The group will meet five times, on Tuesday evenings, beginning October 20th. It will be facilitated by Walter Zeichner, a Burlington counsellor, and will provide an opportunity to address your concerns and turn your fears into positive actions in a supportive environment.

Enrollment is limited, and advance registration is required. To sign up, or find out more, contact Vermont C.A.R.E.S. at 863-2437.

of the drug, the lack of thorough trials to determine effectiveness and safety, the high cost, who will have access to AZT, and the unavailability of other experimental drugs.

AZT has been shown to have heavily toxic effects on some people who take it: anemia and bone marrow suppression, requiring frequent transfusions, are one effect. Many using the drug report severe nausea and headaches. It seems that the more sick a person is when they start taking the drug, the more likely they are to have a negative reaction. Some taking AZT report virtually no side effects.

The lack of long term studies means that there is no idea of the long term safety; some researchers fear that there may be severe damage to major internal organs from taking the drug for a long period.

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