

29 November 2011

‘Get tested’ says consultant ahead of World AIDS Day

People should have an HIV test as part of a routine sexual health check, according to a consultant at the Royal United Hospital.

The commonest reason for people still dying of HIV/AIDS in the UK today is that they are diagnosed too late for effective treatment.

While HIV is a treatable condition, this relies on it being diagnosed at a stage where something can be done about it, rather than waiting until the body’s immune system is really struggling.

Kate Horn, a consultant at the RUH’s Department of Sexual Health and HIV Medicine, says: “HIV is today seen as a chronic treatable condition – not curable but very definitely treatable. HIV positive individuals are now living with HIV, rather than dying of AIDS.

“To prevent the avoidable disaster that is late diagnosis of HIV, people should see the HIV test as being a routine test which they have as part of an annual sexual health check or MOT.”

According to the Health Protection Agency, the total number of people newly diagnosed in the UK in 2010 was 6,658, half of whom acquired their infection through heterosexual contact, followed by 45% (3,000) through sex between men.

Kate adds: “Anyone who has had sex without a condom should go and get themselves checked out. Anyone could be at risk. The age range of recent new diagnoses at the RUH is 17 – 71 years.

“The HIV test is not in itself a specialist test, and while we offer it to everyone who comes here and asks for it, people can also ask their GP to do it.”

The RUH has invited all primary care clinicians in B&NES to the Department of Sexual Health and HIV Medicine on World AIDS Day (1 December) to discuss how to increase HIV testing in primary care settings, and the importance of doing so.

Along with improving the success of treatment, diagnosing and treating HIV as early as possible reduces the chances of the infection spreading – it’s estimated that at present the 25% of HIV-infected adults in the UK who are unaware of their diagnosis are responsible for more than 50% of new infections.

The simplest form of anti-retroviral therapy currently available consists of taking one single, albeit rather large, tablet once a day containing a combination of three drugs.

Patients who are stable and well-controlled on therapy attend for check-ups twice or three times a year and otherwise get on with their lives.

Ends

Notes to Editors

According to the Health Protection Agency, almost 70,000 people accessed HIV-related care at the end of 2010, an increase of 4,100 (6%) compared to 2009.

In 2010, 21% of adults with HIV were aged 50 years or older, compared with 13% in 2005. This increase is due to effective antiretroviral therapy improving survival among the diagnosed HIV-infected population, and continued transmission at older ages.

To find out more about the services provided by the Department of Sexual Health and HIV Medicine at the RUH go to www.ruh.nhs.uk/sexualhealth