

## CDC Targets HIV in Blacks National conference in Atlanta focuses on epidemic among African-American men.

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It's half past midnight, and hip-hop pulses through 836, a Midtown Atlanta nightclub where hundreds of **black** men dance, drink and check one another out.

Muscular men, many **in** tight tank tops, some wearing baseball caps, a few with pants hung low, saunter by Ronnie Bass. With his white T-shirt, baggy jeans and Yankees hat cocked to one side, Bass blends **in**.

But he has something many of these men don't: condoms. He has bowls of them, along with safer-sex brochures, a video about negotiating intimate discussions and kits to test for **HIV**, the virus that causes AIDS.

Bass hands condoms to the men passing by, stopping to talk to one. "I want you to see our intervention," he says, **in** a flirting tone.

"All right!" the man replies. "I need some intervention, baby!"

Bass, executive director of the AIDS organization Someone Cares, is trying to limit **HIV in** the population with the highest known infection rate **in** the country: young **black** men who have sex with other men, many of whom don't identify themselves as gay.

It's a community that is a major focus of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2005 National **HIV** Prevention Conference **in** Atlanta, which started Sunday and runs through Wednesday.

**HIV**, first reported 24 years ago, may be on the rise again **in** the United States, especially among gay men, after steady declines **in** AIDS rates during the 1990s, according to the **CDC**. About 1 million Americans have **HIV** or AIDS, one-fourth of whom don't know it, with roughly 40,000 new infections every year, the **CDC** says.

**In** recent years, the epidemic has taken on more of a **black** identity. African-Americans, who make up 12 percent of the U.S. population, account for more than half of new **HIV** and AIDS cases.

Among white gay men -- still a high-risk group -- researchers say that methamphetamine, Internet chat rooms and a disregard for condoms after years of "AIDS fatigue" are fueling an **HIV** surge.

**In black** men who have sex with men, the picture is less clear, **in** part because such men were less studied until recently. But the **black** community and public health officials have increasingly focused on the disproportionate rate of **HIV** among **blacks** -- especially **black** women, who are 19 times more likely to be infected than white women. The vast majority of **black** women who get **HIV** get it from sex with men. The biggest risk factor for **black** men is unsafe sex with other men.

"In the past five years, the evidence has accumulated to emphasize the importance of this population," said Richard Wolitski, acting chief of prevention research at the **CDC's HIV** center. "We need to do as much as we can to reduce their **HIV** risk."

Some bisexual **black** men serve as a "bridge" for spreading **HIV** to **black** women, researchers say. A study **in** North Carolina last year found rising **HIV** infections among **black** male college students, most of whom said they had sex with men and many also with women.

Posing as straight

A **CDC** study four years ago **in** seven cities of men ages 23-29 who had sex with men revealed alarming statistics: 32 percent of the **black** men tested positive for **HIV**, compared with 14 percent of Hispanic men and 7 percent of white men. "That's approaching Botswana's level of infection," Dr. David Satcher, then the U.S. surgeon general, said of the **black** rate.

Books such as one last year by J.L. King, a married **black** man who wrote about his affairs with men, have brought a slang term for a long-occurring behavior out of the closet: being on the "down low," or concealing sex with other men behind a straight identity, largely because many African-Americans are anti-gay.

It's unclear whether men on the "down low" use condoms less than other men. But researchers are starting to ask that question, among others.

Lawrence Bryant of the Morehouse School of Medicine interviewed **black** men **in** Atlanta who have sex with men and found that fewer than one-third identified themselves as gay. That may be because some influential **black** churches discourage frank talk of homosexuality, he said.

"You're silently accepted as long as you don't say anything," Bryant said. "The minute you come out, it's a totally different picture."

John Peterson, a psychology professor at Georgia State University, has studied **HIV** among **black** homosexual and bisexual men since the 1980s, perhaps longer than anyone else.

Peterson recently set out to learn why **black** men who have sex with men have higher rates of **HIV** than other men, even though they report similar rates of condom use. He enrolled 95 young **black** Atlanta men **in** a study, then asked them to invite other men with whom they had had sex or close friendships; 63 joined. Peterson found that the men **in** the secondary network used condoms less than those originally **in** the study. That, combined with an already high prevalence of **HIV**, puts all **black** men who have sex with men at greater risk, he said.

Peterson said efforts to study and combat **HIV in black** men have increased significantly **in** recent years. But "is it enough to address the magnitude of the problem? No way," he said. "The cost of not doing enough is continuing to see death, disease and lost productivity of **black** men **in** the prime of their lives."

Defusing a plague

Several efforts **in** Atlanta, some funded by the **CDC**, aim to defuse the epidemic **in black** men and the **black** community **in** general.

At Morehouse, Bryant plans group discussions about sex and **HIV** for **black** men and women, patterned after recent sessions for women only.

AID Atlanta, based **in** Midtown, offers six weekly "Deeper Love" workshops for **black** gay men to discuss self-esteem, dual identity and other issues. The program also runs a weekend retreat at Red Top Mountain State Park.

The AIDS Survival Project recruits **black** men via the Internet for informal, **in**-person chats, dubbed "Brothaz Unplugged."

Our Common Welfare, an agency south of Decatur, serves people with **HIV** and substance abuse, the vast majority of them **black** men. The agency coaches them on how to disclose their **HIV** status to others -- and prevent passing the virus.

Bass, of Someone Cares, based **in** Smyrna, goes to streets known to attract prostitutes and to the parking lots of "adult" bookstores. He hands out "safer sex" kits, containing condoms, lubricant and cards bearing phone numbers for **HIV** information and testing.

But Bass spends much of his time **in** bars: Tower II, east of downtown, and 836, the name given to Midtown's Armory on Saturdays, when it becomes almost exclusively **black**.

"We're a spinoff of the DL [down-low] scene," said manager Mario Harris II. "It's not straight; it's not gay. It's men who like men."

On a recent night at 836, Bass and a few volunteers stood **in** the corner of a patio, handing out condoms and **HIV** brochures while men danced to the music of Snoop Dogg, Lumidee, Bobby

Valentino and other hip-hop and rhythm-and-blues artists. Bass played a video about lovers negotiating condom use -- his "intervention," **in** public health parlance. He also displayed a sign offering free **HIV** testing.

A man approached and asked for a test. He told Bass he had had unprotected sex with other men. Bass told him that abstinence is the only sure way to remain free of **HIV** but that using condoms helps a lot.

Bass donned latex gloves and pricked the man's index finger, drawing a drop of blood that he placed into a vial.

Twenty minutes later, the man returned. His test was negative. So was that of a second man tested that night. Testing and safer-sex messages remain two key public health tools to stem **HIV**, but many **black** men never get either, Bass said.

"You can't sit back **in** some office and expect people to walk **in**," he said. "You have to go to where they are."



Photo

LAURA NOEL / Staff

Besides condoms, Bass' "safer sex" kits include cards bearing phone numbers for **HIV** information and testing.



Photo

LAURA NOEL / Staff

At Tower II, an Atlanta nightclub frequented by **black** men, Ronnie Bass of the AIDS organization Someone Cares hands out free condoms. He also performs free **HIV** tests.

Graphic

**AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND HIV**

**Black** men are seven times more likely to have **HIV** than white men. Their biggest risk factor is unsafe sex with other men. **Black** women are 19 times more likely to be infected than white women; the vast majority get the virus through unsafe sex with men. Health officials say that some bisexual **black** men serve as a "bridge" for **HIV**. **Blacks** make up 12 percent of the U.S. population but account for 51 percent of cases of **HIV/AIDS**.

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**HIV by race**

Race.....	% of male..	% of female.....	% all
.....cases.....	cases.....	cases.....	cases
<b>Black</b> .....	44.5.....	68.8.....	51.3
White.....	37.3.....	18.6.....	32.0

Hispanic..... 16.4.....10.8..... 14.8

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**HIV** by mode of transmission

Male

Behavior..... % of white....% of **black**....% of Hispanic  
.....cases..... cases.....cases

Sex with men..... 76.6.....48.5..... 60.9

Injection-drug use.....9.7.....18.3..... 15.9

Sex with men and IDU....6.7..... 5.0.....5.1

Sex with women.....6.1.....26.8..... 17.0

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Female

Behavior..... % of white....% of **black**....% of Hispanic  
.....cases..... cases.....cases

Sex with men..... 67.1.....80.4..... 78.7

IDU.....30.4.....16.7..... 17.8

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Note: This data, for 2000-03, is from the 32 states with long-term **HIV** reporting. New York and California are not among them, but the figures are thought to be representative nationally.