

HIV Testing

In the Latino Community

By Miguel Mejía

We have begun a new millenium and yet within our Latino community we do not fully understand what is happening with HIV disease. Even though there has been a tremendous effort on the part of public health workers to increase awareness about this issue, there remains a great deal of reluctance towards HIV testing within the Latino community.

We should not place all the blame on the quality of the messages or the effectiveness of our health educators and counselors. We need to remember that the images created at the beginning of the epidemic were those of fear, pain and death. Moreover, there were feelings of shame, guilt and taboos to deal with, all of which remain in spite of the new advances.

That's why, today more than ever, we should inform our families, youth and friends about HIV/AIDS. Education should be conducted in a less negative and more responsible way.

The reality is that more and more of our Latino brothers realize they're HIV+ through the following three scenarios:

1. When they visit the emergency room because they have symptoms of an opportunistic infection.
2. When beginning a new relationship they go to a clinic for a test.
3. Through medical recommendation when there is evidence of a sexually transmitted infection.

We have to begin by understanding that HIV/AIDS is contagious and that there is no cure. HIV is preventable and we need to know how to protect ourselves from it. There are many benefits to knowing if you are HIV+. Getting an HIV test is the only way to know if we're infected. This gives us an opportunity to protect ourselves, care for ourselves and not infect other people.

When getting HIV results we should know the following:

What is a positive result?

What is a negative result?


What is an indeterminate result?

What does it all mean?

Many agencies are already using Orasure as a method to test for HIV. This test is done by rubbing a small sponge inside the cheek to look for the HIV antibodies. This method does not use needles, so it's not painful. This test has been well accepted by the community because people feel more at ease without the use of needles.

Even when there are doubts, myths and fears within the Latino community, we should continue to educate and promote HIV testing as much as possible. We cannot forget that the Latino community is sensitive to its beliefs and culture when implementing educational messages about HIV/AIDS so that our messages will be more effective. The power of information is indispensable and the credibility of our services are as well. We should be direct and sincere, and educate truthfully without offending one's culture and beliefs.

Getting infected is not divine punishment, but could well be the result of bad sexual education.

For more information on the services and treatment available in your area, please call the National HIV/AIDS hotline at 1-800-342-AIDS (1-800-344-2437) from 8:00A.M. – 2:00P.M. or the HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service (HIVATIS) 1-800-HIV-0440 from 12:00P.M.– 5:00P.M. 

Miguel Mejia is a Health and HIV Prevention Educator and Latino Patient Coordinator for Whitman Walker Clinic in Washington, D.C.

Reprinted courtesy of www.PositiveWords.com© 2003 by Dallabrida & Associates