AIDS: Don’t think it could never happen to you

By Camelia Negoita

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is the name for a disease that weakens the body’s ability to protect itself from getting sick. The virus that causes AIDS is HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). The virus is found mainly in blood and can be transmitted through sexual activities, blood transfusions, shared needles and newborn placenta. AIDS is the most dangerous and widespread disease of the 20th century.

According to Dr. Gerald Stein, biology professor at the University of North Florida in Jacksonville and author of AIDS The Eye of the Storm, 40,000 Americans and 6 million people worldwide become HIV infected every year. In the next five to ten years, 36 million people will die from HIV. Every day, 16,000 people become hosts for the lethal virus, at the rate of eleven per minute.

Beyond the cold numbers and statistics lies the dramatic struggle for survival. During the health educational campaigns, the same message is repeated. We have seen the suffering and pain. Now and then, the news and TV stories shock us. The death statistics have become sort of common matter. Until recently, AIDS was considered the stigma of gays and lesbians. Now we have learned that anybody can get infected. AIDS crosses all lines of gender, race, class, age, and sexuality.

People with HIV infections may not get symptoms for years. You cannot tell if someone is infected by simply looking at them. You can meet people with HIV anywhere - at work, at a baseball game, at the grocery store. Based on estimates from the United Nations AIDS program (UNAIDS), approximately 47 million people have been infected with HIV since the start of the global epidemic.

Those who have been diagnosed with AIDS, however, are beginning to feel and show the effects of a weakened immune system. Although they need more support and assistance in their battle for life, society has placed a stigma on them and their relationships with others. Fear prevents the rest of society from interacting or helping AIDS patients.

As the disease takes hold in more communities across the country and around the world, it becomes more and more likely that you will know someone who is affected by AIDS - a friend, a coworker, or a family member. Even if AIDS has not yet touched your life so personally, you might want to learn more and help those who fight the disease.

AIDS isn’t really about staggering headlines, numbers or statistics. AIDS is about people, about friends and family, coworkers and caregivers, about showing support and understanding. A simple gesture that makes a huge difference in the life of someone with AIDS is making contact with them. Humans crave for touch. Being touched is comforting. It’s one of the ways we know that we are liked and trusted by the others. Without touch, there is less reinforcement, less comfort, less love. Without touch, there is a sense of isolation, of being alone. Although hugging and shaking hands are completely safe, many people are afraid of touching those who have AIDS.

Despite the general indifferent attitude, AIDS spreads more fear and hate than any other world issue or concern. Why this general hysteria towards the disease and its victims? Maybe because AIDS has the reputation of killing more people than any war; maybe because AIDS knows no boundaries; or maybe because no cure or vaccine has yet been found.

If you see AIDS as a disease that only touches other people’s lives, you probably won’t take the precautions that could save your own life. Hundreds of American adults may be unaware of their HIV status and continue to engage in behavior that could jeopardize their health and that of many others.

Knowing your HIV status is the first step in seeking medical intervention and gaining access to effective strategies to prevent the spread of HIV.

By the time you finish reading this article, 55 more people will have been infected with HIV throughout the world.

For more information on HIV testing or HIV/AIDS, please contact the Center for Disease Control (CDC) National AIDS Hotline at 1(800) 342-AIDS or the local CDC in Daytona Beach at (904) 257-1700.