

HIV up among gays and bisexuals

Spike also seen among intravenous drug users. -ST

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By Judith Tan

THE number of homosexuals and bisexuals here who tested positive for the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) last year climbed to a new high.

The increase comes as overall figures rose 7.8 per cent, with activist groups and counsellors calling for more education across all genders and lifestyles.

Although the number of HIV cases from heterosexual transmission - which makes up the bulk at 54 per cent - has fallen from 255 in 2007 to 248 last year, the spread among homosexuals and bisexuals has spiked, rising by 16 per cent and 127 per cent respectively between 2007 and last year.

These statistics, released on the Health Ministry (MOH) website on Wednesday, show a total of 456 people tested positive for HIV, the first stage of the Aids virus, last year. Unfortunately, half were already in the late stages when they were diagnosed.

The virus can lay dormant for up to 10 years, showing little sign of infection.

Of those who tested positive, more than nine out of 10 were men and the total number infected since the first official Aids case appeared here in 1985 is now 3,941. Nearly one-third have died.

The MOH did not cite reasons for the increase in the numbers, but the increase in clinics carrying out anonymous tests may have encouraged more people to come forward for testing.

Anonymous HIV testing began here in 1991 in a Kelantan Lane clinic run by the Action For Aids (AFA), a voluntary community-based organisation committed to Aids prevention, advocacy and support.

It was extended to two general practitioner clinics in June 2006, and another four in November last year.

Apart from that, researchers and volunteers are saying there is an increasing number of gay men getting infected due to open relationships with their partners.

'The men have become complacent and do not use protection. This trend was also found by research done in five large cities in the United States and in the Netherlands,' said Mr Brenton Wong, former vice-president of AFA.

Male and female individuals in both the 20-29 and 30-39 age group had the highest increase of transmission.

AFA spokesman Lionel Lee said these age groups are the most sexually active and also travel more, increasing their exposure to the virus.

They may have also not seen the effects of HIV personally. They are therefore less likely to be afraid of contracting HIV, he said.

Another concern was the spread of HIV through intravenous drug use. Infections increased almost three times - from seven in 2007 to 20 last year.

'The use of drugs is also on the rise, impairing judgment. Younger people have become

■ MODES OF TRANSMISSION OF HIV/AIDS			
	2006	2007	2008
Sexual transmission:			
Heterosexual	222	255	248
Homosexual	95	130	151
Bisexual	14	15	34
Intravenous drug use	14	7	20
Blood transfusion	0	1	0
Renal (kidney) transplant overseas	0	0	0
Perinatal (mother to child)	2	2	0
Uncertain	12	13	3
Total	359	423	456

ST GRAPHICS

adventurous sexually and are rather complacent about having multiple sexual partners and using protection. Coupled with drugs, it is a definite recipe for disaster,' Mr Wong said.

He added that younger people are not aware of the early years of the Aids - acquired immune deficiency syndrome - epidemic when death rates were high.

'For this new generation, the educational messaging about safe sex should be consistent and persistent to knock some sense into them,' he said.

Mr Lee said the AFA is exploring new avenues to educate high-risk individuals, but added: 'We have not been able to use the mass media as this is still a sensitive topic.'