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HEADLINE: Poll Shows Widespread Awareness, Misguided Fears About Disease

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BODY:
Almost everyone now fears that AIDS might strike them, not just people in especially vulnerable groups, a new Washington Post survey shows.

Seven in 10 people in the Washington area now think AIDS threatens "the general public," not just homosexuals or other members of high-risk groups. In a nationwide poll two years ago, only one in three thought AIDS would become a public threat.

Nearly one person in four here says he or she has done something to try to avoid exposure to this still spreading disease, and virtually everyone is aware of it.

Seven persons in 10 reject -- and only one in 10 accepts -- the notion "that AIDS is God's punishment" of homosexuals. But many told interviewers they are avoiding homosexuals.

Many said they have changed their sex habits to avoid casual partners, "sleeping around" or prostitutes.

One person in three thinks it is unsafe to associate with someone who has AIDS, even if there is no physical contact, and many more are not sure whether it's safe.

An alarmed elementary school teacher went even further. She said she "would not wipe a student's tears, now that AIDS virus has been found in tears."

A District man said AIDS has "made me a lot more picky about who I mess with."

These are among the results of the Washington Post survey, which shows that the public here has become overwhelmingly convinced that AIDS is a serious public health menace that can personally affect them. The findings are reported by Washington Post survey director Barry Sussman and polling assistant Ken John, who directed a telephone survey of a random sample of 1,057 adults in the metropolitan area.

The results impress those who measure public awareness of problems of all kinds.

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Ninety-seven percent of those surveyed knew about AIDS. The number who know about any issue -- medical, political or economic -- is usually much less. A few years ago only 44 percent of the public knew that the Democrats controlled the House of Representatives, and 58 percent that the Republicans controlled the Senate.

The results also might surprise anyone who has read the repeated statements of doctors and scientists that AIDS can only rarely, if ever, be transmitted except by direct and intimate exposure to blood, semen or other body fluids of AIDS victims or carriers. The almost one in four who answered "yes" when asked, "Is there anything you yourself are doing to avoid exposing yourself to AIDS?" showed that many fearful persons are more skeptical.

Many are taking almost certainly useless measures -- avoiding restaurants, for example, because they "might" have gay employes.

And the number of area residents -- 13 percent -- who say they work at a job that might expose them to AIDS is probably much greater than the uncertain number whose work actually might put them at any risk.

When the seven in 10 who think AIDS is already a public health threat are joined by those who think it will become one "in the next few years," the total so convinced becomes eight in 10. Four percent said they personally know an AIDS victim. This translates to more than 80,000 persons in the Washington area.

Fifty-three percent said the government is spending "too little" on AIDS research, only 2 percent said it is spending too much, and 16 percent said it is spending about the right amount. Under pressure from critics, the Reagan administration is now asking Congress to vote $126.3 million for AIDS studies, up from the $85.6 million the president requested last January.

AIDS virus was recently found in tears of an affected person. But simply wiping away a person's tears is not likely to transmit AIDS. All the evidence to date indicates that the main threat comes from sexual or other intimate contact with victims or carriers or contaminated blood -- by sexual acts, use of a contaminated needle or a transfusion of affected blood.

Many persons nonetheless said they are shunning all contact with homosexuals. "I am not hanging out with gays," one man said. Others said: "I won't go near a homosexual," "I'm staying away from gay hangouts," "In a social situation with a gay population, I do not drink from the same glass or smoke their cigarettes when a cigarette is passed," "I am not kissing my gay hairdresser."

Many reported more prudent sexual behavior, From men: "I'm doing less hugging and kissing," "I'm staying away from casual relationships," "I'm limiting my one-night stands," "I'm going out with girls only," "I'm not going out with bisexual chicks."

Also: "I no longer use prostitutes," "I've cut down on going to massage parlors," "I'm being faithful to my wife and hoping she is doing the same."

And from women: "I'm not sleeping around," "I don't date anyone who is bisexual," "I don't mess around with anyone except my boyfriend, and hopefully he's not messing around with anyone with AIDS."

Other women said: "I'm a good girl and stay in at night," "I'm not having sex. You can't stop socializing, but you can avoid having sexual intercourse." And some men reported: "No sex with anybody," "I don't mess with nobody!"

Some said they are praying. Several said they have stopped giving blood -- though there is no danger of catching AIDS by doing so -- and some said they are wary of transfusions, although blood is now being checked for evidence of the AIDS virus.

Many sought to avoid the virus by "staying away from dirty bathrooms," "public bathrooms," "water fountains" or "hot tubs and swimming pools," though, again, there has been no evidence of transmission via these sources. A physician said: "I don't use public telephones at Dupont Circle."

Nurses and other health workers reported being especially careful about using gloves, gowns and masks and other precautions when treating AIDS patients. But some nonmedical workers reported being almost as concerned -- without good reason, doctors would say -- just because they are in contact with "the public."

"I research problem accounts and exchange pens and paper with the public," said one worried woman.

Not everyone reported such extreme fears. One man said he does "nothing more than good personal hygiene -- you can't just avoid people because you never know who's a carrier or who has it until they're very ill."