

## **AIDS Awareness Month Begs You To Join the Fight**

December is AIDS Awareness Month, and earlier this week was AIDS Awareness Day. In light of these two events, and the recent admission from Charlie Sheen that he is HIV positive, we thought it was appropriate to shine a spotlight on a worldwide problem which has claimed [34 million lives to date](#), and one that seldom gets enough mainstream media coverage.

We want to update and re-educate the masses who mostly left HIV and AIDS in the '80s, and have since moved on to even more sensationalized health coverage such as the Ebola 'outbreak' and the bird flu. Heck, it took a heterosexual, white Hollywood hunk to get mainstream media outlets to even attempt to discuss an issue that affects [1.2 million](#) people in the United States alone. And even when outlets did report about Sheen's recent admission it was clouded in fear-mongering headlines such as, "Charlie Sheen AIDS Cover-up," from The National Enquirer. Not only is that headline wrong – Sheen has HIV, not AIDS – it harkens back to a time when everyone was afraid of a new and under-researched epidemic. We have come a long way since then and it is important to remind people of that. It is great that Charlie Sheen's brave admission is getting people updated information about the disease, but let's not allow fear rise up again and the stigma continue. Let this be a reason for education, not condemnation.

First, let's dive in with some fast facts. HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus) is not the same as AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), although they are linked. HIV, left untreated, will eventually become AIDS. However, with many advances in treatments and medication, the instances of AIDS in America are almost unheard of in this day in age. The [most common ways of transmission](#) are through the exchange of bodily fluids (such as blood, semen, and rectal or vaginal fluids) usually through sexual contact or intravenous drug use; as well as pregnancy, childbirth, and breast-feeding. It is not transmitted through saliva, kissing, toilet seats, etc. There is still no cure for the disease, although there have been amazing advances in treatment and medication. So much so that the average [life span for a person living with HIV is now the same as someone who is HIV negative](#). We've also come a long way in terms of prevention as well with PrEP and PEP, but we'll get into that in just a second. Before that we want to talk about stigma and the deadly cycle it cultivates in our society.

The stigma associated with HIV is nothing new, and as a gay man, I have educated myself on the topic from a young age. I understood that I was in a high-risk group and took the responsibility to get ahead of the game and inform myself of the facts and risks associated with my lifestyle. However, HIV and AIDS is not just a homosexual disease, as we've clearly seen from Charlie Sheen, and it shouldn't be treated as such. In a [2010 survey](#), it was found that black heterosexual men and women were the third and fourth population with the

highest rates of new HIV infections in the US. Now we understand that these statistics are well below that of the male homosexual population ([63% of new infections](#)), but to treat it as a gay disease is simply false and leads to a higher stigmatization for non-homosexuals. This stigmatization, in both hetero- and homo- sexual populations, creates an endless cycle of shame and ignorance. After all, if you don't know you're infected you aren't sick, right? Sadly, that is not the case and [1 in 8 people](#) don't know they carry the virus and thus can transmit it unknowingly to their sexual partners who will go on to do the same. Not only does this raise the rates of new infections it delays the urgent need for education, medication, and lifelong treatment.

By keeping HIV in the closet we've left an entirely new generation in the dark. A report in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* found that HIV diagnosis rates rose from around [3,000 to around 7,000](#) among gay and bisexual men (aged 13-24) from 2002 to 2011. This is a concerning jump in new infection rates, seeing as the overall [annual HIV infection rate fell 33%](#) among Americans aged 13 and older from 2002-2011. The fear of the initial epidemic subsided leaving the stigma to keep the disease in the shadows. This younger generation was never fully exposed to, or educated about, the history and very real harm associated with HIV. That, combined with our hook-up (and app driven) culture, has led to a surprising rise in new and easily preventable infections.

[PrEP](#) (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) and [PEP](#) (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis) are at the forefront of preventing this movement. Both of these relatively new medications have drastically altered the landscape that is HIV prevention. [PrEP](#) is antiretroviral medication, recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO), which is taken daily by an HIV- person as a prevention method for people who feel they're at substantial risk for HIV infection. This combined with condoms almost assuredly prevents you from being infected with the virus. On the other end is PEP, which if started within 3 days (or 72 hours) of infection, can drastically lower your chances of being infected with the disease. However, PEP is not 100% effective and involves a 28-day program (with the possibility of minor side effects) and should not be taken lightly. Having said that, these two means of prevention are tremendous leaps forward for people who are most at risk for contracting the disease.

### **So what happens now?**

We need to take the national stage Charlie Sheen has given us to shed the stigma that has long held us back and take the opportunity to educate the people at large about how far we've come in treating and preventing HIV. We need to continue to be vigilant when it comes to safe sex, with condoms *combined* with the use of PrEP, while also making testing the norm and not the occasional (and very stressful) trip to the doctor. There are even at home kits such as [OraQuick](#), which make it easy to privately check your status. Knowing your [current status](#) is

one of the most powerful things you can do to help in this fight. We need to understand that the battle is not over and that there are many rounds ahead. We need to be more open and honest when it comes to our status, even when it's just to friends and family. The open discussion makes the subject less scary and the stigma less severe.

We're so close to eradicating this awful disease. Help everyone by joining the cause!