



## Branch - Hillsdale - St. Joseph Community Health Agency

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"Your Local  
Health Department"

**NEWS RELEASE**  
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### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

#### **World AIDS Day – A Day of Remembrance**

**Coldwater, MI.** During the past 35 years since AIDS was first identified, there have been many challenges and advances associated with this disease. Today, on December 1st – **World AIDS Day** – let's reflect on the impact that HIV and AIDS has had on people, families, the country and the world.

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. If left untreated, HIV can lead to the disease AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). Unlike some other viruses, the human body can't get rid of HIV completely. So once a person has HIV, he/she has it for life. HIV attacks the body's immune system, eventually destroying the body's cells that fight infection, leaving the body at risk for opportunistic infections or cancers that can take advantage of a very weak immune system. When a person develops these specific opportunistic infections and/or cancers, it's a signal that the person has advanced to AIDS, the last state of HIV infection.

Treatment for the disease has come a long way over the past 35 years. During the 1980's, being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS was a 'death sentence.' While there is still no cure for HIV, with proper treatment and medical care, HIV can now be controlled. The medicine used to treat HIV is called antiretroviral therapy or ART. If taken the right way, every day, ART can dramatically prolong the lives of many people with HIV, keep them healthy, and greatly lower their chance of transmitting the virus to others. Today, when a person who is diagnosed with HIV before the disease has advanced too far, is treated and remains on treatment, they can

expect to live nearly as long as someone who does not have HIV. In addition, there is now a pre-exposure prophylaxis (or PrEP) which can be taken to prevent a HIV-negative person from getting HIV from a sexual or injection-drug-using partner who is HIV positive. Studies have shown that PrEP is highly effective for preventing HIV, when used as prescribed.

Globally, an estimated 36.7 million persons are living with HIV/AIDS. In the United States, more than 1.2 million people are living with HIV. Nearly 1 in 8 of those that have contracted the disease are unaware they have it. The good news is that the number of new HIV diagnoses fell 19% from 2005 to 2014, with large declines among heterosexuals and persons who inject drugs (PWID). Still, one in ten HIV diagnoses occur among PWIDs. Gay and bisexual men continue to be the most affected population, accounting for two-thirds of all new diagnoses.

According to Rebecca Burns, Health Officer for the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency, "In light of concerns that heroin use is up, we need to be on guard for increases in HIV and AIDS transmission. We know that heroin use increases the risk of exposure to HIV, as well as to other infectious agents, through the sharing of drug paraphernalia." She went on to add "Snorting or smoking does not eliminate the risk because people under the influence of drugs still engage in risky sexual and other behaviors that can expose them to these diseases."

Since the only way to know for sure if a person has HIV is through testing, the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency is expanding its HIV testing efforts. With special funding received from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, the health department offers additional testing options. Val Newton, Prevention Services Director for the tri-county health department states "In addition to offering the standard HIV blood test, we now offer two other HIV tests. The first consists of an oral swap from the side of the cheek. The second is a rapid test which consists of a finger stick and gives results within 30 minutes."

Testing is anonymous, confidential and is available free of charge to those who qualify for free services. The local health department has trained staff in testing and counseling who can assist people in understanding both their risks and their test results. People who are interested in being tested should contact their local county health department office to schedule an appointment. To learn more about HIV/AIDS and testing and counseling services, please visit our website at [www.bhsj.org](http://www.bhsj.org) and click on the Clinic Services Tab at the top of the page.

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