

On April 4, 1983, 1,200 men attended the District of Columbia's first public forum on HIV/AIDS at Lisner Auditorium. Presented by Whitman-Walker, the forum featured public health leaders and distributed what little information there was to a panicked community. The epidemic was well underway in DC and across the nation.

Today, after 30 years of HIV/AIDS, more than one million Americans are living with HIV. More than half a million have died of AIDS. More than three percent of all adults in DC have been diagnosed with HIV. Another three percent is likely infected but undiagnosed.

The numbers get scarier in the DC gay community: one in seven gay or bisexual men in DC is HIV-positive. One in three black gay or bisexual men in DC is infected.

You want a reason to still take HIV/AIDS seriously? Go back and read those last two sentences.

Sure, the situation today is very different. Now, people with HIV and in treatment can expect to live for many years, perhaps even a full lifespan.

But HIV/AIDS will change your life forever. Ask anyone living with the virus about things like side effects of medications that you will be on for the rest of your life; worrying about paying for lifelong treatment if you lose insurance or government funding is cut; dealing with how and when to disclose your status to your loved ones or in a romantic or sexual situation; and fear of rejection from those same people.

Can you handle all of that? Maybe you could. But do you really want to? Is a risky sexual encounter really worth all of that?

HIV/AIDS is 100 percent incurable. But it is 100 percent preventable.

Let's face a fact: men who have sex with men are still at high risk for HIV infection. Thirty years into the epidemic, that is still true.

So, gay and bisexual men need to be especially careful about protecting themselves. You all know the drill, but let's go through it again:

Use condoms every time you have sex. Be empowered to ask for protection with your partners. Talk about HIV openly and honestly with your partners.

Get tested regularly for HIV. Currently, we recommend getting tested at least every six months, more frequently depending on how active and risky you are.

Whitman-Walker Health offers free walk-in HIV counseling and testing at our Elizabeth Taylor Medical Center in northwest DC and our Max Robinson Center in Anacostia. Our mobile testing unit goes into the community and provides HIV testing and education. You may have seen them at Town, Apex or the Giant stores in Columbia Heights and Anacostia.

Our Community Health department works to educate our neighbors about how to prevent HIV infection by speaking to local organizations and schools, attending community events and health fairs, and

educating people about the options they have to protect themselves. Again, you've probably seen them at local bars and clubs.

For those with HIV, we provide a wide range of high quality health care services, including primary medical care, dental care, mental health services and even legal help. While we accept commercial and public insurance, we can also find ways to help those who cannot pay still get care.

Gay and bisexual men face a very different HIV/AIDS landscape than in 1983. Back then, it was an almost certain death sentence within a year. Today, it is a condition that can be managed but not cured. But, prevention is still the best way to fight HIV/AIDS.

That first public forum represents the start of Whitman-Walker's commitment to the fight against HIV/AIDS. That commitment will only end with a cure and vaccine. Until that day, Whitman-Walker Health will continue to be an active leader in this fight.

<http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/06/02/30-years-later-our-lives-are-forever-changed/>