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Booklet offers information about HIV

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HIV treatment and prevention are getting a boost through a new booklet for HIV patients and a public service advertisement aimed at reducing behavior that increases the chances of contracting HIV.

The booklet, "I Just Found Out," for the first time, gathers all the information typically sought by someone newly diagnosed with HIV.

"The same questions were coming up over and over and over again," said Heather E. Ross, a social worker at Miriam Hospital who works with people who recently have tested positive for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. She also helped develop the pamphlet, along with doctors, nurses and representatives of the state Department of Health.

Those questions included where to get help, who had to be told and what steps patients could take to protect their loved ones from becoming infected.

The answers were not always easy to come by.

Unlike with other chronic diseases, such as diabetes, those with HIV often find it difficult to talk with family, friends and neighbors who might point them toward where to get support, Ross said. "HIV, because of the stigma, it really is a very isolating disease. The people who do the best have good support systems."

And a favorite source of anonymous information — the Internet — also is not much help.

"When you look on the Web, there's almost too much information," she said, adding that much of what is on the Web is not specific to Rhode Island. That contrasts with the pamphlet. "All of this information is local."

The 20-page booklet is also a handy way of giving patients what they're looking for. "We used to give them all these loose pieces of paper," Ross said. Now, "they have all the information in a very concise form."

Ross said the booklet has been well received by patients. "Some people are a little bit leery about taking literature with them," she said. "They like to read it in the office."

It also has proved a valuable resource for doctors, nurses, counselors and other practitioners the first time they deal with someone who has recently tested positive.

The public service advertisement, "Safe. It Feels Good," encourages three behaviors to reduce the risk of HIV infection and the development of AIDS: using condoms during sex, not sharing needles when taking intravenous drugs, and getting tested.

The fast-moving 30-second spot is set on a backdrop of a baseball game in which a player tries to steal home. Split-screen images show a woman going for an HIV test, a man preparing to use a condom and a woman refusing to share a needle.

The ad, developed by the Rhode Island Community Planning Group for HIV Prevention in conjunction with the Health Department, can be seen on the Web at www.youtube.com/watch?v=d1O5zEf7720.

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