

## HELSINGIN SANOMAT

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### HIV infection rate in Finland remains at record high level


Needle exchanges keep infection rate down among IV drug users

The number of HIV infections has remained at a record-high level in Finland for the past two years. Both in 2006 and 2007 there were more than 190 infections every year.

After 2005 the number of infections from sexual contact grew by one third.

Experts are unsure about the specific reasons for the jump in HIV infections. There has been growth in cases stemming from sex between men and from heterosexual contact.



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**The previous surge in infections** was in 1999, when an epidemic affected users of intravenous drugs. In that year 85 people caught the virus through IV drug use.

Distribution of clean needles and education on the issue reversed the trend, and last year only eight new cases of HIV were attributed to the use of infected needles.

**Kirsi Liitsola**, a researcher at the HIV unit of the National Public Health Institute, sees a clear problem in the fact that about 20 per cent of those who are infected with HIV have themselves tested at a fairly late stage, after carrying the virus for years.

Experts have called for easier access to HIV tests.

**Sini Pasanen** of the Finnish Body Positive Association, a peer organisation for people with HIV in Finland, says that doctors should be more active in offering HIV tests.

**A large proportion** of HIV infections among heterosexual men originate from foreign travel.

Liitsola says that HIV infections among gay men have increased in Europe and North America.

She believes that awareness of HIV is high among gay men, but that after repetition of the same message for more than 20 years, many seem to have grown numb to it.

On the other hand, the emerging generation does not remember the dramatic events of the 1980s and early 1990s. Finland's first HIV infection was recorded in 1980. The largest number of deaths from AIDS - a total of 32 - was in 1995.

In addition to better access to testing, Liitsola and Pasanen are calling for more education about HIV and how to avoid it.

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