AIDS Spreads More Rapidly Among Women
By Daniel Pearl

ATLANTA -- AIDS continues to spread at a faster rate among women than among men, federal researchers said.

The Centers for Disease Control, in a report released yesterday, said diagnosed cases of acquired immune deficiency syndrome increased 29% among women this year, compared with 18% among men. One out of every eight people diagnosed with AIDS next year will be female, researchers predicted.

Intravenous drug use among women caused half of this year's AIDS cases, CDC reported. Heterosexual contacts with male drug users caused another 20% of new AIDS cases among women, becoming a more prevalent cause than before, said Dr. James W. Curran, director of the AIDS program at CDC here. Sex with bisexual men accounted for an additional 3%.

"There is now a large pool of heterosexual men capable of transmitting it," Dr. Curran said.

The rise of AIDS among adult women is of particular concern to health officials because more women are having babies who are infected with the human immunodeficiency virus that causes AIDS. In Florida, for example, a recent study found that one out of every 220 mothers giving birth tested HIV-positive, said Spencer Lieb, AIDS surveillance administrator for the Florida Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services.

Meanwhile, CDC already has predicted that AIDS will be among the top five killers of women of child-bearing age next year. And the World Health Organization recently estimated that the number of annual AIDS cases among women world-wide will equal the number of cases among men by 2000.

"Because of the incubation period -- five years or so -- women that were infected in the last five years are just now presenting themselves as people with AIDS," said Jery Kilker, spokesman in New York for the World Health Organization, whose annual "World AIDS Day" Saturday will focus on women.

Experts say another reason AIDS cases have increased more among women than among men is that gay men have been mobilizing against the disease and reducing risky sexual behavior, while many poor women are doing the opposite: trading sex for crack, for example.

"There are a number of studies that show up to 50% of women who are infected don't even know they're at risk," said Constance B. Wofsy, a professor of clinical medicine and co-director of an AIDS research center at the University of California at San Francisco.
Dr. Curran said it's unlikely CDC's figures are skewed by an increase in women testing themselves for HIV infection, since the middle-class women who have easy access to testing still aren't showing up prominently in AIDS statistics.

The agency said it identified more than 4,000 cases of AIDS among women during the past year, or 4.3 cases for every 100,000 women in the U. S.

The District of Columbia, Florida, New Jersey, New York and Puerto Rico all reported more than 10 cases for every 100,000 women, CDC said. Black and Hispanic women represent 72% of all U. S. women diagnosed with AIDS.

In another report issued yesterday, CDC acknowledged that studies in New York City suggest a link between HIV infection and cervical disease, but said additional study is needed.