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Doctors Uncertain Whether the Rigors of Play Will Harm Magic Johnson

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Magic Johnson's decision to return to pro basketball was welcomed as a powerful statement that AIDS-infected people need not give up and die. But no one knows for sure what the rigors of play will do to his health.

"We can theorize as much as we want. The problem is we haven't had anyone in this position before," said Dr. Michael Mellman, a Los Angeles Lakers team physician and one of Johnson's doctors. "The only thing that we'll know is what happens in this experiment called Earvin Johnson."

Johnson said Tuesday he is rejoining the Lakers. His announcement came 10 months after he retired because he was infected with HIV, the AIDS virus. He had not yet developed AIDS symptoms. Since then, Johnson has turned in outstanding performances in the NBA All-Star Game and Olympics.

"Because Magic is an international hero, his return to professional basketball is an encouraging signal for people living with HIV throughout the world," AIDS Project Los Angeles said in statement.

"It's fantastic because so many people get the impression that having HIV means you're soon on your way to dying," said Mark King, spokesman for the Shanti Foundation, an AIDS counseling and education group in Los Angeles.

"What Magic has done is show all of us that an HIV-positive test is not the end, that you can pursue your goals, live an active life and that HIV ... doesn't necessarily mean giving up."

People infected by the AIDS virus can go two to 15 years before they develop symptoms, with seven years about average. Death usually comes two to three years after symptoms start.

Studies of uninfected, world-class athletes show that training for highly competitive events can suppress the immune system and make them more vulnerable to infectious diseases.

Yet a recent University of Miami study of 100 AIDS-infected men found that moderate, aerobic exercise helps boost immunity and may extend life.

Mellman said that Johnson's condition will be closely monitored through the season and that "you can postulate that exhaustion can be bad, but a positive psychological outlook can be good."

Johnson, who expects to play 50 to 60 of the Lakers' 82 games during the 1992-93 season, said his decision "poses

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a small risk, but if you take care of yourself and do what you're supposed to do, I'll avoid that risk."

Experts insisted Johnson poses no threat to other players.

The epidemic "has been around for more than 12 years, and there is no evidence that HIV has ever been transmitted as a consequence of physical contact during an athletic competition of any kind," said Dr. David E. Rogers, an NBA consultant and vice chairman of the National Commission on AIDS.

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