Cause of Death of Actress Daveigh Chase, 35, Revealed to Be AIDS

An actor in “The Ring,” “Lilo & Stitch” and “Big Love,” Daveigh Chase later struggled with addiction and homelessness.

June 30, 2026 By Trent Straube

As a child actor, Daveigh Chase terrorized audiences playing an evil ghost girl in the 2002 blockbuster The Ring. The same year, Chase established herself as a talented voice actor in the animated films Spirited Away and Lilo & Stitch. As an adult, she appeared in HBO’s series Big Love (2006–2011). Fans were surprised to learn that Chase died June 16, 2026, at age 35.

Chase’s boyfriend, Roy Hernandez, confirmed the news with TMZ, claiming she had been battling meningitis—an inflammation of areas surrounding the brain and spinal cord—and a blood infection that led to sepsis.

But this week, details from the Los Angeles medical examiner records obtained by Us Weekly revealed unexpected details: The cause of death was listed as AIDS, with polysubstance use noted as a significant condition.

Polysubstance use refers to taking two or more drugs within a short period of time. As the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) writes in a webpage about overdoses, “Whether intentional or not, mixing drugs is never safe because the effects from combining drugs may be stronger and more unpredictable than one drug alone, and even deadly.”

Chase, who also had a role in the cult film Donnie Darko, had struggled with addiction and homelessness in recent years, reported Entertainment Weekly. Her mother believes her substance use stemmed from Chase’s use of painkillers such as oxycodone prescribed to her after a 2016 motorcycle accident.

Technically, people don’t die of AIDS but rather of AIDS-related illness. AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is a condition caused by HIV, a virus that attacks the body’s immune system, which fights off infections. Without HIV treatment, the immune system breaks down over time, making the body vulnerable to cancers and opportunistic infections; these are what cause death.

None of the reporting mentioned whether Chase had ever been tested for HIV, the virus that

causes AIDS, or whether the actress knew her status.

Getting tested for HIV and knowing your status can be lifesaving. People with HIV who achieve and maintain viral suppression experience slower disease progression, enjoy better overall health and are less likely to develop opportunistic illnesses. What's more, people with an undetectable viral load don't transmit HIV to others through sex. This is known as treatment as prevention, or Undetectable Equals Untransmittable (U=U).

Today, there are safe and effective drugs on the market to treat and prevent HIV that are easy to take and have few side effects. Many are available as daily tablets and long-acting injectables.

About 1.2 million people are living with HIV in the United States, and about 13% of them don't know they are positive. What's more, nearly 40% of new HIV cases are transmitted by people who don't know they are HIV positive.

According to a 2026 report on national HIV data, nearly 39,000 people tested positive for HIV in the United States in 2024; more than one in five of them (22%) also had AIDS. "This shows that too many people are being diagnosed too late and underscores the need to improve the reach of HIV testing in the nation," according to the CDC. "With early diagnosis and highly effective treatment, a person with HIV can stay healthy, never develop AIDS, and if virally suppressed, will not transmit HIV through sex."

There were 4,296 HIV-related deaths in 2024, according to the CDC.

To learn more about HIV and AIDS, check out the POZ Basics. The section on HIV Transmission and Risks reads in part:

HIV is transmitted through the following body fluids:

- Blood
- Semen
- Pre-cum
- Rectal fluids
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk.

There are several ways this can happen:

- From condomless vaginal/frontal or anal sex with someone who has HIV, while not using a

condom or not using medicines to prevent (pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP, and post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP) or treat HIV.

- From sharing needles, syringes or other injection equipment with someone who has HIV while not using PrEP.

- From mother to child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. However, if the mother is in regular care and on HIV treatment, this risk is reduced to nearly zero.

- From being stuck with a needle or cut with a sharp object that contains HIV-positive blood. This is mostly a risk for healthcare workers.

- From getting a blood transfusion. However, this risk is rare in the United States.

HIV is not transmitted though saliva, urine, feces, vomit, sweat, animals, bugs or the air. Therefore, you are NOT at risk for HIV if you:

- Are bitten by a mosquito or any other bug or animal.

- Are near a person who is HIV positive and sneezed.

- Eat food handled, prepared or served by a person who is HIV positive.

- Share toilets, telephones or clothing with a person who is HIV positive.

- Share forks, spoons, knives or drinking glasses with a person who is HIV positive.

- Touch, hug or kiss a person who is HIV positive.

- Attend school, church, restaurants, shopping malls or other public places where there are people who are HIV positive.

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