

BASIC FACTS ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

Many people have heard about HIV and AIDS—it is a topic in newspapers, on the radio and on television, in the marketplace and on street corners. However, many people still do not know exactly what HIV and AIDS actually means, they believe it is a disease of marginalised people, and deny it will affect them. Many still do not know how to protect themselves.

For the education sector to construct a creative and effective response to HIV and AIDS, it is essential that everyone involved in the response have basic knowledge about the disease and the epidemic.

HIV is short for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. After someone is infected with and tested for HIV, he or she is said to be *HIV positive*. However, this does not necessarily mean that he or she has AIDS. AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome, can take many years to develop. *AIDS* occurs when a

person's immune system has been severely weakened due to the presence of HIV. An HIV-positive person can feel and look healthy for a long time after becoming infected. In this healthy-looking, HIV positive state, a person can infect others. Eventually, though, the virus kills or impairs more and more cells in the body's immune system and the body loses the ability to fight off common infections and diseases. People with AIDS die from diseases that are usually not dangerous for people who have healthy immune systems.

In some countries, medical treatment is available that can slow down the rate at which HIV weakens the immune system. Other treatments can prevent or cure some of the illnesses associated with AIDS. As with many other diseases, early detection offers more options for treatment and prevention of complications. HIV cannot be cured—but its progression to AIDS can be significantly slowed.

HOW IS HIV SPREAD?

HIV and AIDS does not discriminate. Everyone is vulnerable to HIV, regardless of age, nationality, sex, race, or social status. HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is spread through four bodily fluids: blood, semen, vaginal secretions and breast milk. The virus can be spread from an infected person only if his or her bodily fluids enter the bloodstream of an uninfected person. This can happen in three ways:

- ▶ **THROUGH SEX.** Unprotected sexual contact—be it vaginal, oral or anal—with an infected partner is the most common method of HIV transmission.
- ▶ **THROUGH BLOOD.** Using unsterilized needles and syringes that were previously used in an HIV-positive person can transmit the virus—for example, in a healthcare setting or through intravenous drug use. The virus can also spread through transfusions of HIV-infected blood.
- ▶ **FROM PARENT TO CHILD.** An HIV-positive mother can pass the virus to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.

Fact Sheet Adapted from: UNESCO, HIV/AIDS and Education: A Toolkit for Ministries of Education (Bangkok: UNESCO, 2003).



A FEW WORDS ABOUT PARENT-TO-CHILD TRANSMISSION

Women can transmit the virus to their babies during pregnancy, labour and delivery or through breastfeeding. This fact often reinforces stigma and discrimination against women who are HIV positive; the blame for infecting the child is placed solely on the mother. That the mother may have been infected by the child's father is nearly always overlooked. Therefore, talking about parent-to-child transmission rather than mother-to-child better recognizes the roles and responsibilities of both parents in protecting themselves and their families against HIV infection.

HIV *cannot* be transmitted in the following ways:

- ▶ through the air or by coughing or sneezing
- ▶ through food or water
- ▶ through sweat or tears
- ▶ by sharing cups, plates or utensils with an infected person
- ▶ by touching, hugging or kissing an infected person
- ▶ by sharing clothes or shaking hands with an infected person
- ▶ by sharing toilets or bathrooms with an infected person
- ▶ by caring for or supporting an infected person
- ▶ by mosquitoes, fleas or other insects

HOW IS HIV AND AIDS SPREADING IN THE CARIBBEAN?¹

- ▶ HIV transmission in the Caribbean is occurring largely through heterosexual intercourse (almost two-thirds of all AIDS cases to date are attributed to this mode of transmission).
- ▶ Sex between men, which is heavily stigmatised and in some places illegal, remains a significant—but still neglected—aspect of the epidemic.
- ▶ HIV transmission through intravenous drug use remains rare, with the significant exceptions in Bermuda and Puerto Rico.
- ▶ The Caribbean epidemic is predominantly heterosexual. Although it was concentrated among specific populations (e.g., sex workers and drug users) in many places, the virus is spreading to the general population.
- ▶ Experts warn that the region appears to be at a “tipping point,” thought to be a rate of 5%, a stage when the infection rate develops a strong potential to spread widely and quickly.

¹UNAIDS, 2004 *Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic* (Geneva: UNAIDS, 2004).

