

HIV and AIDS: basic facts

HIV and AIDS is the biggest crisis the world has ever seen. It is killing more people than any war or famine in history. But it doesn't have to be this way. With access to treatment and education, the disease can be halted and people can live longer, healthier lives.

What is HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for Human Immuno-deficiency Virus.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

Someone who contracts the HIV virus is said to be 'HIV positive'. HIV is a retrovirus that attacks the immune system so that it can't fight off illnesses and infections. As the disease progresses, a person with HIV contracts secondary infections like tuberculosis or pneumonia, and is said to have AIDS.

This process usually happens within eight to 10 years. However, some people become sick very rapidly and others can remain healthy for many years. This can vary according to a person's age, whether they have access to proper healthcare, and other factors.

Without treatment, a person with HIV and AIDS will suffer from infections, sometimes for months or years, before they eventually die from them.

How is it transmitted?

The HIV virus is passed on when someone comes into contact with certain bodily fluids of an infected person. These are the ways it can be transmitted:

1. Heterosexual and homosexual sex. Heterosexual sex is by far the most common way that HIV is transmitted in developing countries. In sub-Saharan Africa, at least 90 percent of transmissions are through heterosexual sexual contact. The chances of HIV being passed on through sex are higher if: other sexually transmitted infections are present; if sex is unprotected; or if the infected person is in the very early or late stages of the disease.
2. Mother-to-child: mothers can pass on HIV to their babies during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding. Without treatment, babies born to HIV positive mothers that are not breastfed have a 15–30 percent risk of contracting the disease. Breastfeeding increases this by 10–15 percent.
3. Blood transfusions and sharing of needles during intravenous drug use. These are the most 'efficient' (although not the most common) ways of passing on HIV.



Over 15 million children have been orphaned by HIV and AIDS. In Malawi, Ella*, aged 4, is one of them. She's recently lost her parents and lives with her elderly grandmother.
*Name changed for privacy.



Who has HIV and AIDS?

- About 40.3 million people are infected with HIV and AIDS globally. This includes 2.3 million children under 15. Infections among women are increasing.
- In 2005, 4.9 million people were newly infected with HIV and 3.1 million people died of AIDS.
- 13,500 people contract the disease every day. At least 1,900 of these are children under 15.
- 95 percent of new HIV infections are in poorer countries.
- About 14,000 people in Australia are HIV positive.
- Unless there is a drastic increase in prevention programs, it is estimated that another 45 million people in poor countries will have HIV and AIDS by 2010.

Where is it most common?

- The worst affected area in the world is also one of the poorest regions in the world – sub-Saharan Africa, where about 25.8 million people are infected. Some countries have particularly high rates, like Botswana and Swaziland, where 30 percent of the population aged 15–49 have HIV and AIDS.
- HIV and AIDS is also spreading rapidly in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, with about 1.7 million people now infected.
- About 8.5 million people in Asia are infected, including 1.1 million people who were infected in 2005 alone.
- Approximately two million people in Latin America and the Caribbean are infected.

Can it be cured?

- There is no cure for HIV and AIDS, but it can be treated and prevented.
- People with the disease can take drugs called anti-retrovirals (ARVs). These slow the progression of the disease and keep people healthy for much longer. People can live up to 20 years or more with the disease if ARVs and good nutrition are available.
- Because HIV and AIDS causes people to get secondary infections such as tuberculosis and skin diseases, they also need treatment for these infections.
- Five to six million people in developing countries urgently need anti-retroviral treatment. About 15 percent have access to it.
- Prevention and education programs together with treatment are the best approach to tackle the rapid spread of this killer disease.

For you to do

1. Draw a bar graph showing the numbers of people living with HIV and AIDS in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe / Central Asia, and Latin America / Caribbean.
2. What do these initials mean?

HIV _____

AIDS _____

ARV _____