

20. HIV and AIDS



Objectives

By the end of this session, group members will be able to:

- Explain what HIV and AIDS are.
- Describe how HIV is transmitted.
- Explain the difference between HIV and AIDS.
- List ways HIV is not transmitted.
- List ways to prevent HIV transmission.
- Explain what HIV positive means.
- Describe the “window period.”



Background notes

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV is a virus that is passed between people through contact with infected blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breastmilk. HIV weakens the immune system, making it easier for people to become sick. When a person with HIV becomes sick with many illnesses that do not get better with medicine, he or she is said to have AIDS. AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. Acquired means that you get the disease from somewhere else; it does not develop on its own. Immunodeficiency means the immune system is weak and unable to fight off infections and illnesses. Syndrome means a combination of symptoms and diseases, such as weight loss combined with skin cancer and pneumonia. AIDS is the word used for the most serious stage of a person's infection with HIV. There is no cure for HIV or AIDS.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is passed between people in three ways:

- Sex with an HIV-infected person where the penis enters the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person.
- Blood to blood. From an HIV infected person's blood to another person's blood through an opening in the body such as a cut, from a transfusion or by sharing something that cuts or pierces the skin (knife, razor, or needle). This includes sharing circumcision knives, needles, or ear piercing, with someone who has HIV.
- Mother to child. HIV can be passed from a mother who is HIV infected to her baby during pregnancy, at the time of birth, or through breastfeeding.

The majority of people are infected with HIV by having sex with someone who is HIV infected. A person with another STI is much more likely to contract HIV.

You cannot get HIV infection from:

- Touching, hugging, talking to, or sharing a home with a person who is HIV infected or has AIDS.
- Sharing plates, utensils, glasses, or towels used by someone with HIV or AIDS.
- Using swimming pools, toilet seats, door handles, telephones, or other items used by people with HIV or AIDS.
- Having someone with HIV or AIDS spit, sweat, or cry on you.
- Being bitten by mosquitoes.
- Donating blood.
- Being coughed on by a person with HIV or AIDS.

Young people are becoming infected with HIV faster than in any other age group. The only certain way to protect yourself against HIV transmission is to abstain from sexual intercourse.

What is safer sex? People who have decided to be sexually active can make choices to practice safer sex. Safer sex describes a range of ways that sexually active people can protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Practicing safer sex also provides protection against pregnancy. There are lots of ways for loving and sexual feelings to be shared that are not risky. Some of them include:

- Hugging
- Holding hands
- Kissing
- Touching each other
- Rubbing against each other with clothes on
- Talking about sexual dreams and thoughts
- Touching your partner's sex organs, as long as males do not ejaculate near any opening or broken skin

Being in a relationship where both people are faithful or using condoms to protect their partner and themselves can reduce the risk of infection with HIV or other STIs. A faithful relationship needs the commitment of both partners. Being faithful is a way to protect partners who are married. Faithfulness is not a way for young people to protect themselves. When someone has a faithful relationship for a short time and then starts a new relationship with someone else there is still a risk because the person has many partners.

Sexual intercourse without a condom allows body fluids where HIV can live to come into contact with another person's body fluids. Using a latex condom correctly for every act of sexual intercourse is called protected sex because when used correctly for each sexual act, condoms can really reduce the risk of HIV infection. Although condoms reduce the risk of transmission, they are not 100 percent effective in preventing HIV infection.

What does HIV positive mean?

When the body's defence system (immune system) comes into contact with a disease, it produces germ fighters, called antibodies. Antibodies fight and destroy viruses and germs that enter the body. When someone becomes infected with HIV, the defence system begins to produce antibodies

to fight HIV. HIV tests look for HIV antibodies, because HIV antibodies are proof that HIV lives in the body. If a blood test shows that the body is making antibodies to fight HIV, it is proof that HIV lives in the body and the person is considered HIV positive.

It takes the body some time to start producing antibodies to fight HIV, so a person could be HIV infected but it would not show up on a blood test. This time when someone is infected with HIV but does not test positive is called the "Window Period." It is possible for someone to test HIV-negative during the window period but still be infected with HIV. During this time, people who are HIV infected are able to transmit the virus to others. The window period is usually 3 months, but in very rare cases could be 6 months. People who have a negative test result and have had unprotected sex during the past 3 months are advised to go for another test in 3 months. During this time, they should not have unprotected sex.

When are people with HIV infectious to others?

People with HIV can infect others as soon as they are infected with the virus. People with HIV may not know they are infected and may look, act, and feel healthy for a long time, possibly more than 10 years. It is impossible to tell from looking at someone if he or she is infected.

From HIV to AIDS

The body has an immune system that helps keep out infections. The immune system keeps out infections the way a house protects the people inside from rain and cold. HIV attacks the immune system. HIV enters the body slowly and invisibly and breaks down the immune system. When the immune system can no longer protect the body from disease, HIV has turned to AIDS.



**HIV slowly weakens the body's immune system.
A weak body is like a neglected house that cannot protect us from rain and cold.**

Illustration: Ministry of Health, Family Health International (FHI). Antiretroviral Therapy [brochure]. Nairobi: FHI; 2003.

The body becomes like a house that falls apart and can no longer protect from rain and cold. At this point, people become very sick from different illnesses, including colds (homa), skin infections, cancer, or tuberculosis.

Most people who have HIV do not become sick right away. In some cases, it can take as many as 10 years or more for a person to develop AIDS. People can stay healthy longer by eating well and getting treatment of illnesses and infections quickly.

People with AIDS have a weak immune system and are more likely to get sick with other diseases such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, skin infections, or cancer. But, not everyone with tuberculosis has AIDS. People with AIDS may also experience:

- Weight loss.
- Fever for more than one month.
- Diarrhoea for more than one month
- Sores on sexual organ for more than one month.
- Cough for more than one month.
- Skin infections that keep coming back.

Remember: Although the above can all be symptoms of AIDS, just because a person has any of them does not mean that they are infected with HIV. The only way to tell if a person is infected with HIV is by testing, because the above can be symptoms of other illnesses or diseases.

Questions about HIV and AIDS

- **Can HIV be transmitted through kissing?** There are no reported cases of people becoming infected with HIV just from kissing. It might be risky to kiss someone who has bleeding gums or other sores in their mouth. It would be even more risky if both people had bleeding cuts or sores in their mouths. People should wait until any sores or cuts have healed before kissing.
- **Can a person get HIV infection from a mosquito?** When mosquitoes bite someone they do not inject the blood of the previously bitten person into the next person. Diseases like malaria are spread through mosquito saliva. HIV gets digested in the mosquito's stomach before it can find its way to the saliva.
- **If a person tests negative for HIV does it mean he or she cannot catch it?** A negative HIV test result means the person is not infected at the time or possibly that they have the infection and it is still in the window period. They can still become infected if they have unprotected sex with someone who is infected.
- **Is there a cure for HIV?** There is still no cure for HIV.



Session guide

1. Facilitate a discussion by asking group members the following questions:
 - What does HIV stand for?
 - What does AIDS stand for?
 - What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?
 - How is HIV transmitted?
 - What are some ways that HIV is not transmitted?
 - How can HIV be prevented?
 - What does it mean to be HIV positive?
 - What is the "window period"?
 - How can someone know if they are infected with HIV?
2. After discussing all of the questions, share the information from the Background Notes section.



Main points

- HIV is a virus that is passed between people through contact with infected blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breastmilk.
- HIV weakens the immune system, making it easier for people to become sick. When a person with HIV becomes sick with many illnesses that do not get better with medicine, he or she is said to have AIDS.
- People with HIV can infect others as soon as they are infected with the virus. People with HIV may not know they are infected and may look, act, and feel healthy for a long time. The only way to know if someone is HIV infected is through testing.
- HIV can be prevented by abstaining from sexual activity.
- The risk of HIV infection can be reduced by being in a relationship where both people are faithful to each other or using condoms.



Activity: Wildfire

Description: Two secret HIV carriers interact with a larger group who are shaking hands. After the game, many players are surprised to learn they have been unknowingly “infected.”

Materials: Several pieces of paper: Cut and fold one piece of paper for each person. On three of the pieces of paper, write the letter “C.” On one piece of paper write the letter “X.” Leave all the other pieces of paper blank.

1. Carefully fold the pieces of paper, mix them up, and give one to each person. People should look at their paper without letting anyone else see it.
2. Ask the group to stand and each person shake hands with three people. After everyone has done this, have the group sit down.
3. Ask the people with the “X” on their pieces of paper to stand up. Ask everyone who shook hands with this person to stand up. Ask everyone who shook hands with a standing person to stand up as well. Continue until everyone is standing.
4. Now ask the group to imagine that the person with the paper marked “X” was infected with HIV or another STI. Ask them to pretend they had sexual intercourse with the three people they shook hands with. (Remind the group that this is imaginary, and that they do not really have an infection.)
5. Ask the group to check if they had a “C” on their paper. Explain that these people used condoms correctly, so they had protected sex and can sit down. Everyone else who had a blank piece of paper had unprotected sex.
6. Lead a discussion by asking the following questions:
 - How does this relate to real life?
 - If you had really been infected with HIV, how serious would that be?
 - How did the first people standing (the ones with the “X”) feel when they learned that the X meant they had HIV? What could they do now?
 - How did the others feel when they had to stand?