

# HIV/AIDS



Young HIV/ AIDS Peer Educators  
a force for change

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**WHAT TO KNOW  
AND DO**

## ***Dear Friend***

HIV/AIDS is now a serious problem in this great nation. About 2.6 million Nigerians (aged 15-49 years) are infected with HIV and several thousands have already died of AIDS and AIDS related illnesses. It is estimated that by year 2003, 4.9 million will be infected (Federal Ministry of Health). This is bound to have a major socio-economic impact on the Nigerian Society.

### **WHAT IS HIV?**

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is the germ which causes AIDS. When a person is infected with the virus, his or her body fluids such as blood, semen, and vaginal secretions will contain HIV and antibodies against the virus. Upon infection, HIV stays in the body and slowly destroys the body's defence system (soldiers of the body). When the defence system can no longer resist diseases, the infected person becomes sick and is said to have AIDS.

## WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is the name that we give the condition that occurs when HIV has weakened the body's defence system and a person begins to fall ill. People with AIDS may have different symptoms. Some people may lose weight, have Tuberculosis (TB), have prolonged diarrhoea, and have skin infections. **REMEMBER:** These symptoms also occur in people who do not have AIDS!

## How is HIV Contracted?

Since HIV is found in body fluids, it can be transmitted when a fluid from an infected person enters the body of another person. This happens primarily during sexual intercourse, when blood is exchanged such as during blood transfusion, when using unsterilized skin-piercing instruments (e.g. needles, syringes, razor blades, circumcision instruments, etc.) and from an infected mother to her infant during pregnancy, childbirth or through the breast milk.

## **How HIV is not contracted**

HIV is not contracted through casual contact such as sharing of clothes, dishes, toilet seats or through eating together. You cannot be infected with HIV from hugging, shaking of hands or touching or being near a person with HIV or AIDS.

## **Can Mosquitoes Transmit HIV the same way they transmit Malaria?**

No! Mosquitoes TAKE blood from a person but they do NOT pass that blood to another person. The malaria parasite lives in and is transmitted through the mosquitoes's saliva. HIV is not. Scientists have proven conclusively that neither mosquitoes nor any other insect can transmit HIV.

## **Can HIV be transmitted through kissing?**

There is no risk of HIV transmission if it is a kiss on the cheek. In the case of a kiss involving saliva exchange, it is unlikely that HIV will be transmitted. Saliva contains very little virus and it is believed

that a glass full of saliva would be needed to infect someone! The presence of sores (injuries) in the mouth are however likely to increase the risk of transmission during kissing.

### **What are the symptoms of AIDS?**

Following infections with HIV, eventually a person with AIDS will begin to manifest major and minor symptoms of AIDS such as the following:

- \* Prolonged diarrhoea
- \* White coating on the tongue
- \* Enlargement of glands in the neck, groin and/or armpits
- \* Persistent fever
- \* Persistent cough
- \* Skin infections
- \* Unexplained weight loss

Since these symptoms characterize other diseases (a persistent cough may mean tuberculosis, diarrhoea may mean intestinal illness), tests for the presence of HIV antibodies are the surest ways of determining if someone has AIDS.

## **How can a person know if he or she has HIV infection or AIDS?**

Remember, if a person has AIDS, he or she has begun to suffer from some of the illnesses associated with AIDS. However, if the person has HIV infection, he or she is not yet sick. We say that the person is HIV positive or is living with HIV. A person knows that he or she is HIV positive when the person has taken a special test and evidence has shown that there are HIV antibodies in the body. Most tests for HIV antibodies use blood although newer ones use other body fluids such as saliva or urine.

If you feel that at some time, you have been at risk of HIV infection, it is a good idea to have a test. If people know that they are HIV positive, they can be careful not to infect other people. They can also take good care of their health and perhaps still enjoy a long life.

## Who is at risk?

Given the modes of transmission, EVERYONE is at risk. However, there are behaviours and practices that increase the risk of HIV transmission and infection. Having multiple sexual partners and engaging in unprotected sex increase individual risk to HIV infection. Often times, commercial sex workers only are associated with a higher risk of HIV/AIDS, whereas individuals who engage in casual sex (unprotected sex) for pleasure with multiple partners are exposed to the same level of risk. To enable you appropriately modify your behaviour, you need to assess your level of risk of HIV infection.

## How do I assess my risk to HIV?

Put “x” or tick in the following boxes as appropriate.

- [ ] Have I had more than one sexual partner without using condom?
- [ ] Have I had a sexual partner who has or has had other sexual partner?
- [ ] Have I had sex with anyone who has tested positive for HIV without using condom?

- [ ] Have I had sex without using condom with anyone whose past sexual behaviour I do not know?
- [ ] Have I had sex without using condom?
- [ ] Have I had one or more sexually transmitted infection (STI) (discharge or sores on my genitals)?
- [ ] I did not go to the clinic for the proper treatment of the STI
- [ ] Have I or any of my sexual partner had a blood transfusion?
- [ ] Have I had injections or received incisions from traditional healers, untrained health personnel or local injectors?
- [ ] Have I shared any skin piercing instruments with others?
- [ ] Do I handle body fluids including blood, without using universal precautions (hand gloves for example)?

**Note:** If you have ticked any of these questions, then you are at risk of being infected with HIV. The more the ticks, the greater your risk. So, go for counseling at the nearest HIV/AIDS counseling center or health facility.



## **How can people at risk change their behaviours?**

Changing behaviours and attitudes is a process that takes time and effort. You need to recognize the fact that several things help people make changes they can sustain over a period of time.

*Imagine you have multiple sex partners, and you are ready to change your behaviour; you will have to move yourself through the following stages of behaviour change:*

### **1. Unawareness to awareness**

You are told that Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) exist and can be dangerous to your health and the health of your partner. It can also facilitate the transmission of HIV. You need to know how to recognize an STI and know how to deal with it.

### **2. Awareness to acquiring skills and knowledge**

At this stage you are given information to help you know if you have an STI. You need information as regards what to do and where to go if you think

you are infected. You will be told the effects of STIs on your health and the health of your partner(s) if you don't get treated.

### **3. Acquiring skills and knowledge to motivation**

You are encouraged to visit a clinic if you think you have an STI. You are told the location of the nearest clinic. You are also told that STIs are easy to treat if they are diagnosed early. You are encouraged to use condoms with all partners to help prevent STIs.

### **4. Motivation to Trial**

At this stage, it is high time you visited the clinic in order to relieve your symptoms. You are encouraged to take all drugs given to you at the clinic and not to share them with others. It is also time for you to use condoms with each sexual partner.

## 5. **Trial to Success**

At this last stage you are told you did the right thing by coming to the clinic when you thought you had an STI and bring your partner(s) along. You are encouraged to come again if you have more symptoms. You are congratulated on using condoms with your partners and reminded of the need to continue using condoms.

### **Why are sexually transmitted infections important in HIV prevention?**

Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs) like syphilis, gonorrhoea, are transmitted in the same way as HIV. STIs create small (sometimes even invisible) sores on the genitals. These sores are openings that may allow HIV to be transmitted from one person to another. They are extremely dangerous. If you have an STI, or think you have, please go to a clinic and have it properly diagnosed. Then, notify your sexual partner to also be treated. *You must take all the prescribed drugs.*

## **How long does it take for someone who is infected with HIV to develop HIV antibodies?**

The time period between HIV infection and the development of antibodies can vary from six weeks to six months. This is known as the window period. On average, 95% of those infected with HIV develop the antibodies (protective cells) within three months. The formation of antibodies seems to depend on the route of exposure, the amounts of virus transmitted, the immune response to the infected person and the frequency of exposure. For example antibodies occur 6 to 8 weeks following infections as a result of infected blood transfusion.

It is important to remember that negative antibody test does not always mean that a person is not infected with HIV: it could mean that the test was done before the infected person developed HIV antibodies following an exposure.

## **Can AIDS be cured?**

There is no cure for AIDS yet. The defence system continues to weaken as the HIV infection advances

in the body. However, there are cures for some of the infections that people may suffer when they have AIDS. There are drugs (very expensive) which can make people with AIDS feel better during their illness.

### **How can HIV infection be prevented?**

There is no vaccine available to prevent infection with HIV. Scientists are working to develop one but it is not likely to be available for a long time. However, infection can be prevented by using the ABC approach to safer sex.

- (A) **Abstinence:** Abstaining from sex prior to infection is a sure way of preventing sexually transmitted infection of HIV.
- (B) **Be faithful:** Faithfulness to one uninfected partner will prevent HIV infection. In polygamous marriages, the husband and his wives should remain mutually faithful.
- (C) **Condom use:** Regular and correct use of condoms provide a high level of protection against HIV infection.

***In addition:***

- i. Everyone should avoid sharing needles or using any skin piercing instrument that has not been sterilized and
- ii. Everyone should ensure that blood is screened for HIV before having or giving a blood transfusion.

**Is it necessary for a couple to use condoms if they are both infected with HIV?**

YES, in a situation where one or both (married or unmarried couple) is/are infected they should use condoms every time they have sex because:

- (1) They may be infected with different types of the virus and cross infection may result if a condom is not used.
- (2) More virus can be transmitted which may accelerate the onset of AIDS.

## **Does the risk of HIV infection increase, if a person has an STI?**

YES, the person who has an STI such as herpes or syphilis which result in sores or ulcer is at greater risk of transmitting or contracting HIV. Those at risk of acquiring STIs are also at risk of acquiring HIV because of similar behaviour patterns and similar modes of transmission.

## **What advice can be given to people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH/A)?**

Persons who are living with HIV/AIDS require information, counseling, care and support. In general, they should be advised to:

- \* Protect themselves from further sexually transmitted infections.
- \* Avoid passing the infection to others through unprotected sexual intercourse.
- \* Share information about their HIV status with their spouses and those they trust.
- \* Eat nourishing food and get plenty rest.

- \* Seek counseling about pregnancy, for the sake of the mother and child.

### **How can the Community help people who are living with HIV/AIDS (PLWH/A)?**

- Avoid discrimination and stigmatization of PLWH/A
- Provide support and care to PLWH/A
- Respect the rights of PLWH/A
- Ensure that PLWH/A fully participate in decisions and activities that affect their lives.

### **Rights of people living with HIV/AIDS**

AIDS is NOT a moral issue. It is a public health problem. People living with HIV/AIDS have the same fundamental human rights as any other person. Internationally accepted human rights include:

- \* The right to live
- \* The right to shelter
- \* The right to health care
- \* The right to freedom of movement



- \* The right to freedom of speech and expression
- \* The right to freedom of thought and religion
- \* The right to education
- \* The right to protection against discrimination
- \* The right to dignity
- \* The right to gender equality
- \* The right to employment

People living with HIV/AIDs should not be discriminated against in the exercise of any of these rights, or should there be any stigma because a person is infected with HIV or is suffering from AIDS. They deserve to be treated exactly the same as any other person. Public Health Educators should help educate society about the facts and should be vocal advocates for the rights of people living with HIV/AIDS.

This booklet is being given to you so that you will be better informed about HIV/AIDS. It explains what the disease is, how it is and is not spread and how it can be prevented. One of the best ways to arm yourself against HIV/AIDS is to learn and talk about it. We encourage you to read this and share the information with someone else. The more informed people are, the more likely they are to protect themselves.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:**

National Action Committee on HIV/AIDS (NACA)  
The Presidency, Federal Secretariat Complex,  
Abuja. Room 3A 1.44 1.48 (First Floor)  
Tel: 234-9-5234253  
Email: [naca\\_nigeria@yahoo.com](mailto:naca_nigeria@yahoo.com)

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