

YOUNG PEOPLE¹ AND AIDS

Young People Account for Increasing Number of HIV Infections

Young people account for an increasing number of HIV infections every year. Today, young people between the age of 15 and 24 account for almost 45% of all new HIV infections with an estimated 5.5 million young people living with HIV.² Every day, 6,000 young people become infected with HIV – that’s more than five every minute.

The relationship between young people and AIDS is fortified by a number of often interrelated factors:

- Adolescence is the stage of development when young people become intrigued with sexual relations and experience sexual feelings.
- Most adolescents and young adults also develop a sense of invincibility which often results in risky behavioral experimentation, particularly when it comes to sexual contact and sometimes with drug use.

Today, more information about effective HIV prevention is known than before. However, the new numbers of HIV infection among young adults and teenagers suggests that the inconsistency between what is known about prevention and what is actually done for protection needs to be addressed.

The increasing rate of HIV infection among young people also indicates that more emphasis needs to be placed on HIV prevention.

Vulnerable Young People

For a variety of reasons – cultural, political and economic – some young people are more vulnerable to infection than others.

- Girls are often at higher risk of getting infected with HIV than boys. This is partly because girls are more likely to be pressured into having sex and less likely to be able to control with whom, when and how they have sex.
- Social attitudes to sex and sex education may make it more difficult for girls to get the information they need to protect themselves from the virus.
- Other young people are likely to be infected with HIV because they inject illegal drugs (sharing unsterilised needles is a common route for infection).
- Or they may be more at risk because they are poor or homeless, which makes them more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, for example by being forced to have sex for money.
- Children orphaned by AIDS are themselves particularly vulnerable to infection because they often have no one to care for or protect them, or any means of earning a living.

¹ The United Nations defines young people as those between the ages of 15 and 24.

² UNAIDS, Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic, 2008

Prevention Programs for Young People -- What Works?

HIV and AIDS awareness efforts for young people need to focus on HIV prevention and all the risks with which young people are faced. The current state of the HIV and AIDS epidemics illustrates that addressing risk factors in isolation is not effective in reducing the prevalence of HIV infection among teenagers and young adults.

Harm Reduction Programs for Young Injection Drug Users (IDUs)

- When HIV prevention programs incorporate effective methods of changing sexual behavior and reducing drug-related behavioral risks, sexual transmission of HIV is decreased among IDUs and their partners.
- Young IDUs who continue to inject drugs must be educated about the extreme dangers of sharing needles and syringes, even those that have been cleaned in bleach or another disinfectant.
- Increasing the availability of new syringes to young IDUs who continue to inject drugs significantly would reduce the rate and prevalence of new HIV infections.
- Needle exchange programs have been found to reduce HIV transmission among IDUs without encouraging or increasing illegal drug use, according to research carried out in many parts of the world.

Programs for Girls and Young Women

- Prevention programs aimed at young women need to realistically address the topic of sexual relations, condoms and protection. Programs need to equip adolescent and young women with the confidence and knowledge to make healthy decisions about themselves and HIV.
- HIV prevention programs aimed at adolescent and young adult females need to stress the biological predisposition that all women to HIV infections. Effective prevention programs need to encourage women to take responsibility for their safety if they decide to have sexual relations.
- Young women often are affected by a number of social factors -- sexism, sexual assault and abuse, and rape -- that diminish their level of self-respect and confidence in asking their partner to wear a condom. Young women need to be encouraged to value and protect themselves.

HIV and AIDS prevention campaigns

- Teens and young people living with HIV and AIDS are critical to raising awareness about the disease and reducing discrimination against people who are HIV-positive. Their voices must be encouraged and included in HIV and AIDS programs and campaigns for young people.

Engaging our Youth in the Fight against HIV and AIDS

Youth have been referred to as the 'hope' in the fight against HIV and AIDS but not enough has been done concerning youth problems. If the fight has to continue, the future course of the epidemic depends on efforts mounted today to prevent HIV infection among young people and available treatment to sustain the life of young positive people.

All adults – Government, community and religious leaders, educators, parents and caregivers will have to unite for children and young people to enable them to effect positive change.