

HIV/AIDS: General Overview

Discriminating against people who are infected with HIV/AIDS or anyone thought to be at-risk of infection violates individual human rights and endangers public health. Every person infected with and affected by HIV/AIDS deserves compassion and support, regardless of the circumstances surrounding their infection. Education is crucial in getting this message out.

What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV is an acronym for **H**uman **I**mmunodeficiency **V**irus, a retrovirus that can cause a breakdown of the body's immune system. The immune system is the body's natural defense against disease. Contracting the HIV virus leads in many cases to the development of AIDS or **A**cquired **I**mmune **D**eficiency **S**yndrome and/or related infections or illnesses. AIDS is the name originally given to an array of diseases and malignancies that occur in adults who previously had healthy immune systems. The presence of certain "markers" (opportunistic infections, cancers, T cell count) now constitutes a diagnosis of AIDS.

Is HIV/AIDS still a serious public health issue?

During the past two decades, HIV/AIDS in the United States has expanded from (primarily) affecting white gay men to one that increasingly affects women, older adults, men who have sex with men, and communities of color. For example, while women represent an increasing proportion of persons living with HIV/AIDS, the incidence of newly diagnosed cases of HIV/AIDS is significantly higher in African-American and Latino women based on the overall US population.¹ Globally, the UNAIDS reports 35.8 million persons are infected with HIV/AIDS, with a large percentage not even aware they have HIV or AIDS.²

Why is it important for social workers to know about HIV/AIDS?

In adults, the onset of AIDS can take up to 10 or more years, thus a person infected with HIV may look and feel healthy for many years without realizing they are living with HIV or AIDS. Also, once diagnosed, new drug therapies can delay the progression of HIV or AIDS even longer. Social workers across the fields of practice should educate themselves, clients, and colleagues about testing options and available prevention and early intervention strategies.

How is HIV/AIDS Transmitted?

- Sexual contact
 - semen and seminal fluids
 - cervical or vaginal secretions
 - blood or bloody fluids

¹ Kaplan, L., Tomaszewski, E., and Gorin, S. (2004) Current trends and the future of HIV/AIDS services: a social work perspective. *Health and Social Work*, 29, 2, 153-160. Washington, DC; NASW Press.

² United Nations Programs on HIV/AIDS. (2004) UNAIDS 2004 Report on the Global AIDS Epidemic. [Online]. Retrieved from http://www.unaids.org/bangkok2004/GAR2004_html/GAR2004_00_en.htm on July 27, 2005.

- Blood
 - sharing needles or drug injection paraphernalia (for example, cooker, cotton, water)
- Perinatal
 - infected mother to developing fetus during birth
 - breastfeeding

What are prevention strategies?

- Sexual Contact

Because HIV is most frequently transmitted sexually, the only way you can be completely sure to prevent the sexual transmission of HIV is by abstaining from all sexual contact. If sexually active, a person's risk of contracting HIV can be significantly reduced by consistent practice of barrier methods, including:

- Non penetration sexual contact.
 - Correct use of a latex condom from start to finish, every time you have vaginal or anal intercourse and with each act of oral sex on a man.
 - Being aware that HIV can be transmitted through oral sex. Use a dental dam or a condom cut open while performing each act of oral sex on a woman.
 - Engaging in safer sex practices that involve no penetration such as kissing, massaging, hugging, touching, body-rubbing, and masturbation.
- Blood
 - The sharing of needles during intravenous drug use can increase the risk of transmission of HIV.
 - Continued intravenous drug use should not include the sharing or re-use of needles or cookers; and always include the step of rinsing all drug paraphernalia with full strength bleach, followed by water.
 - Perinatal
 - Learn about birthing options (e.g., vaginal or cesarean).
 - Breastfeeding: new mothers with HIV/AIDS may choose to use formula as an option to breastfeeding

- Use of anti-HIV medications during pregnancy, during birth, and with the newborn has been shown to reduce the rate of transmission of HIV/AIDS to newborns.

What are examples of how HIV is *not* transmitted?

- Donating blood (in the U.S.).
- Mosquito bites or bites from other bugs.
- Sneezes or coughs.
- Touching or hugging a person with HIV or AIDS.
- Sharing towels or clothing.
- The urine or sweat of an infected person.
- Public restrooms, saunas, showers or pools. Sharing eating utensils or drinks.
- Being friends with a person who has HIV/AIDS.

What is the difference between confidential and anonymous HIV/AIDS test?

Anonymous HIV testing is the only form of HIV testing that is not name based. For example, if you receive a test from an anonymous testing center, no name is given. This means that only you (as the person tested) are able to disclose the results of the HIV test. Currently, thirty-nine states plus the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico offer anonymous testing.

Confidential test sites record your name with the test result, but keep records confidential (or secret) unless policies or regulations state otherwise. Examples may include the mandatory reporting of all confidential HIV tests results to the state health department and/ or when a specific agency includes test results as part of the patient's medical record.

How can social workers be a force for change?

You can help stop the spread of HIV! Get involved in agency and community efforts. World AIDS Day (on December 1st) is a special opportunity every year to focus attention on this urgent challenge that affects us all. It is marked around the world by thousands of different events designed to increase awareness and express solidarity and compassion. Social workers can also join the effort to stop the spread of HIV by joining The Campaign to End AIDS (C2EA). To learn more about the C2EA, go to http://www.socialworkers.org/practice/hiv_aids/071305.asp

For more information on HIV/AIDS, contact the CDC National AIDS Hotline at 1-800-342-AIDS (4636).