

# *What is AIDS*



**A Manual for HealthWorkers**

Originally published by former Christian Medical Commission,  
World Council of Churches  
1987 – Birgitta Rubenson

1<sup>st</sup> revision – 1989  
2<sup>nd</sup> revision - 1994  
3<sup>rd</sup> revision – 2003

Health and Healing Desk  
World Council of Churches

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We thank MacMillan Press (“Nutrition and Families” by Jean Ritchie), the Ugandan Ministry of Health, MEDEX, VHAI, and World Health Organization, Global Programme on AIDS, for permission to use their illustrations, and Ingrid Hartig for her drawings.

We also thank the Special Programme on AIDS at WHO for their cooperation in the preparation of this publication.

This small manual is written to help health workers learn about the disease called AIDS. It is an infection for which there is as yet no cure, and no vaccine. It is a disease, which has spread to most countries around the world.

In June 1986, the World Council of Churches organized a consultation to study how the churches could become involved in the AIDS crisis. The churches were called to respond to the crisis, in three main areas: pastoral care, social ministry and education-prevention. This small manual is one contribution.

AIDS is a disease which is mainly sexually transmitted. As such, it is dependent on actions taken by the individual person. Education for prevention is the only possible way to control the spread of infection. A change from risky behaviour to responsible sexual behaviour is necessary. Sex must be seen as part of a long-term faithful relationship. AIDS is related a great deal to life style but also depends on the health status at the time of exposure. The existence, or non-existence, of reliable basic health services also influences the spread of the infection. Thus, the activities to care for AIDS patients and to control the spread must be seen as an integral part of Primary Health Care.

Health care workers must care with love and compassion for people living with HIV/AIDS some of whom may be sick and dying. They must have a basic knowledge about AIDS in order to be able to inform those who might be carriers of the virus how to prevent spreading it. Most of all, they must be able to share with the community their knowledge about the disease and the responsibility to control its spread.

The first cases were diagnosed in North America, Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa at about the same time. Since then the disease has spread to all other continents. The number of people living with HIV is a reflection of the number of HIV-carriers, of whom the majority will develop the disease within 5 to 10 years.

## What is AIDS ?

It is **Acquired  
Immune  
Deficiency  
Syndrome**

AIDS is an infectious disease spread by a virus. It is called a “syndrome” because it consists of several signs and symptoms. The first cases of AIDS were diagnosed in 1981. Since then there has been a rapid spread of the disease in North and South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Cases are being reported from around the world, and most countries now have people with AIDS, or infected with the virus.

## What is HIV?

It is **Human  
Immune deficiency  
Virus**

HIV is a retrovirus, a type of virus that differs from other viruses by its special way of multiplication. HIV was first described in 1983 by a medical researcher in Paris. It has had several names during its history, but HIV has now been accepted internationally.

The virus enters certain cells of the immune system. In these cells, it destroys genetic material. The damage is permanent. All body fluids contain such cells. The concentration is high in BLOOD, SEMEN, VAGINAL SECRETION and BREAST MILK.

## Who is a carrier?

Anybody who has the virus is a carrier and can infect others.

Very often the person does not know that she/he is a carrier. She/he has no symptoms of disease and the person who infected her/him may have had no symptoms, either.

A person can be a carrier unknowingly for many years before the virus has destroyed so much of the immune system that the system cannot fulfil its task of protecting from disease any longer and the person falls ill.

Some months after the infection the body has produced anti-bodies to the virus. These can be detected by a special test.



*Anybody can be a carrier*

## How does the virus spread?

HIV is spread when blood, semen or vaginal secretion of an infected person come in contact with the blood or mucous membranes of a healthy person. It may also be transmitted during breast-feeding from mother to her baby.

The virus is not very active so the concentration of the virus in the fluid must be high to cause infection. Or the person must be exposed to infection several times. The virus is spread:

- **by sexual intercourse (homosexual or heterosexual), when one of the partners is infected**
  
- **by transfusion or injection of infected blood**
  
- **by an infected mother to her unborn child during pregnancy, during delivery or through breast-feeding**



## How is the virus not spread?



The virus is not spread through everyday social contact such as

- shaking hands
- living together
- playing together
- eating together

It is not spread by

- food
- water
- communion cups
- insects
- toilet seats



## How to prevent the spread of AIDS?

There is no vaccine against AIDS.

HEALTH EDUCATION is very important. Everybody should know how to protect themselves from infection, *by living responsibly*. The whole community should be involved.



## Who should be informed? Everybody

Women



Men

School children



## What is a responsible life style?

In many societies it is seen as a sign of adulthood to be sexually active, and there is a strong social pressure among the youth towards early sexual activity. But it is healthy and normal for teenagers not to have sex. It is the best way to stay healthy. There are many other ways to show love and affection like hugging, kissing, doing things together, supporting and encouraging each other.



*"Hugging is as important as sex".*

To build a good and rewarding relationship takes time. It can be broken through sexual unfaithfulness. It might seem exciting to have another partner but the cost may be very high. The risk of getting AIDS or other sexually transmitted diseases increases with the number of partners. To be safe, a person should have sex with only one faithful partner.

The HIV-virus is spread through semen, vaginal secretion and blood. Therefore:

- Have sex with only one faithful partner.
  
- Use a condom if you know or suspect that your partner is infected. To give protection a condom of good quality has to be put on correctly and kept on for the whole duration of the sexual act. Condoms should be used once and then discarded safely.
  
- Do not have casual sex with different partners, with prostitutes (male/female) or with people who go with them. It is not unhealthy for either women or men to abstain from sex – even for a long period. On the contrary it is the safest way to avoid infection. Not only AIDS but other diseases too are transmitted sexually. Some of these can cause sterility (inability to have children) later in life.
  
- Do not have an injection, except in a recognized health institution where you are sure the instruments are sterilized.
  
- Make sure instruments for circumcision, tattooing or ear-piercing are boiled.

## **Who is at risk for infection? Everybody**

Everybody who is exposed to the infection. But especially:

- persons with sexually transmitted diseases and sores on their genital parts
- persons who have many sexual partners
- prostitutes (male/female) with many clients per day
- patients receiving injections with non-sterile equipment
- patients receiving untested blood from unknown donors

## AIDS and pregnancy

AIDS can spread from the mother to her child during pregnancy, delivery or breast-feeding.

A pregnancy might cause the onset of the symptoms of AIDS.

Some hospitals can make a test to find out if a person is infected. A women who is unsure and wants a baby should try to have a test first, if she lives in an area with many persons with HIV/AIDS.

A woman who knows or suspects that she is HIV-positive should avoid becoming pregnant in order to maintain a good general health status for as long as possible. Her husband should use a condom during intercourse in order to protect his wife from becoming pregnant and to protect himself from infection. If he himself is infected, a condom will prevent him from additional exposure to the virus thus help him to maintain his general health for as long as possible.



## Does AIDS spread through Breast-feeding?

The virus has been found in breast-milk in low concentrations. The chances that breast-milk can infect a baby are approximately 14%.

Since the risks of bottle-feeding are much higher, HIV-infected mothers should still be encouraged to breast-feed their infants.

However, they should be advised to exclusively breast-feed for only 6 months and then introduce solid food because this feeding pattern appears to carry the lowest risk of HIV transmission through breast-feeding.





## AIDS and Immunizations

To immunize, syringes and needles are used. These can be a source of infection.

Every child should be immunized with a sterile needle and syringe. Make sure that they are boiled for 20 minutes.

Where disposable needles are used, they should be put into a closed container and disposed of safely.

Blood should never be aspirated into the needle and syringe.

The risk of spreading AIDS through immunization programmes is nil as long as needles and syringes are adequately sterilized.



## Testing

A person who suspects that she/he is infected with the HIV-virus can have a test to confirm the suspicion. The two most common tests are ELISA and simple rapid test.

It normally takes 2-6 months for the body to develop a reaction to the virus after it has entered the bloodstream. A negative test is no guarantee that the person has not been infected in the last 2-6 months.

Before the test is done the person should be informed about the consequences of a positive or a negative test. A person should always be informed about the result of the test. If she/he is positive, advice should be given on necessary changes in lifestyle and help should be made available to cope with the situation. If the result is negative, still a counselling session should follow in order to give advice on how to avoid risky situations in future. To test a person and keep the result secret from her/him is unfair and has no purpose. The person will not know that she/he will infect others and not change her/his behaviour.

## **What the HIV-positive person should know**

Persons who suspect or know that they are HIV-positive should:

- Avoid spreading the infection by
  - not having sexual intercourse
  - using a condom
  - not giving blood for transfusion
  
- Avoid being infected by other sexually transmitted diseases
  
- Avoid smoking and drinking alcohol
  
- Eat varied and nutritious food
  
- Treat other infections, such as
  - tuberculosis
  - malaria
  - sexually transmitted diseases.

## How to recognize a person living with HIV/AIDS

Some persons pass through a first stage with fever and throat infections like a bad cold. They can then be without symptoms for quite some time.

The manifestation of the disease varies widely in the world. Some signs and symptoms are more common in certain parts than in others. “Slim disease”, stressing the weight loss, is most common in Africa, pneumonia is common in the USA and tuberculosis is common in Asia.

The symptoms for AIDS are the same as for many other infections and a final diagnosis can only be made by testing.



It cannot be seen from appearances  
if a person is HIV-positive

## Diagnosing a person living with AIDS

To make the diagnosis the person should show at least 2 major signs and 1 minor sign (for children, 2 major signs and 2 minor signs).

### Major signs:

- loss of body weight (more than 10%) or slow growth in children
- chronic diarrhoea for more than a month
- prolonged fever for more than a month

### Minor signs:

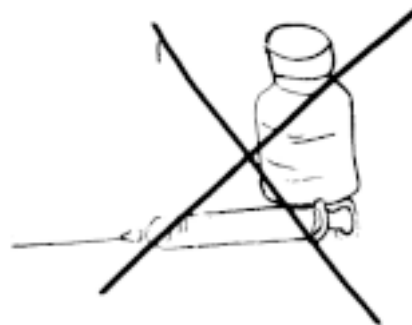
- persistent cough
- generalized itchy skin disease
- thrush in the mouth and throat
- generalized swollen glands
- repeated common infections (in children)
- recurrent herpes zoster (in adults)
- chronic, generalized herpes simplex (in adults)

## How to treat a person living with AIDS

There is still no drug available to cure AIDS. A few drugs, so-called anti-retrovirals (ARVs) can help slow down the process, but they are very expensive, have many unwanted side-effects and are in short supply everywhere.

Where herbal medicines are traditionally used, their use should be encouraged to relieve pain, itching, fever or any other symptom.

Patients should be given treatment to ease signs and symptoms as far as possible. everything should be done to make them feel comfortable.

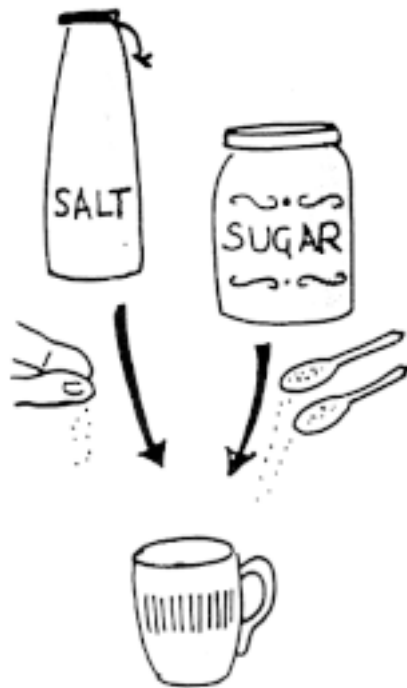


## Symptomatic treatment

### Diarrhoea

is a common symptom, especially among children. As with other diarrhoeas, it is important to prevent dehydration. Give:

- salt-sugar solution
- oral rehydration solution (ORS)
- fluids
- herbal medicine



### Thrush

- paint with gentian violet
- rinse with mineral water
- use herbal medicine where available.

### Herpes Zoster

- aspirin or paracetamol



**Fever**

This is a common symptom in both adults and children.

Give:

- plenty of fluid
- bath or cool rubbing
- aspirin or paracetamol

**Cough/pneumonia/otitis/  
Tuberculosis**

- a course of antibiotics

**Itching skin**

- antihistamines
- pain reliever
- herbal medicine



## **How to care for a person living with AIDS**

Remember that people with HIV/AIDS are in need of social contact and support like anyone else. Their skin or breathing does not transmit the infection and they need physical and psychological closeness, as all of us do.

It is important that relatives are well-informed about HIV/AIDS so that they are not scared of being with their sick family member.

Once they know the diagnosis people with HIV need help to struggle with fear, anxiety and anger. Health personnel and relatives need to be prepared for this. Patients need somebody who is prepared to listen and support them. They need to be encouraged to continue to live and take part in daily activities, as much as they can.

AIDS lowers the body's defence system. Once a person has started to have symptoms she/he will slowly get weaker. But a person can live for a long time between infection, disease and death and it is important to make the best of this time.

Many people fear death as it is unknown. People with HIV-infection need the opportunity to talk about their situation with somebody they can trust. Somebody who will listen. Being allowed to speak about fear and anxiety is often enough to ease the fear.

## Where should a person living with AIDS be treated?

### Hospital/Health Centre

Patients who have fever, prolonged diarrhoea and pain may need to be cared for in a medical institution for a period of time. They will need symptomatic treatment and nursing care.

### Home

Persons who can be cared for at home should be sent home. Well informed, and accepting families may respond better to the social and psychological needs of their relatives.



### **Patients care in the Hospital/Health Centre**

There is no need to isolate AIDS patients for the sake of protecting others from the infection. Sometimes, though, it may be necessary to isolate a patient to protect her/him from surrounding infections.



### **Personal hygiene**

AIDS patients should be helped with their personal hygiene, just like everyone else. This can normally be done without risk. But some things should be remembered:

- soiled or bloodstained linen can transmit the virus
- bleeding or infected wounds can transmit the virus

Therefore, soiled linen should be soaked in simple chlorine solution before washing and carers should cover open wounds or use gloves when dealing with bleeding or oozing wounds. Where these material needs cannot be met, at least soap should be used for washing hands.



**Wash hands often**

## **How to care for a person living with AIDS at home**

A person with AIDS is in need of both psychological support and physical care. As there is no cure available, the best care can often be given by relatives. At home she/he is in well-known social surroundings and feels more secure. A person with AIDS should:

- have plenty of rest
- get nutritious food and drink
- have contact with family and friends
- avoid alcohol and cigarettes

It is important that the family is well-informed about AIDS so that they are not scared of being with the relative. They should know how to protect themselves from the infection, by avoiding contact with infected body fluids.



They should spend time with the AIDS patient, showing that they care for her/him. Physical contact will not transmit AIDS and it is an important way to give comfort and show concern.

In communities where AIDS is spreading, everybody should live as if everybody else was infected. It cannot be seen from appearances if a person is HIV-positive, and so it is better not to take any risk. A community that has learnt about AIDS knows that social contact is not dangerous and that infected people need support and help.

## What the relatives should know

Before relatives take a person home they should know:

- AIDS is not spread through social contact
- AIDS is not spread by skin contact
- People with AIDS need nutritious food to provide energy, protein and vitamins
- People with AIDS need to be touched and caressed
- Sexual intercourse with a person with AIDS leads to HIV-infection
- Blood, vaginal secretion and semen of a person with AIDS are contagious
- Clothes and utensils which have been in contact with body fluids of the patient should be washed in hot water with soap and, if available, soaked in chlorine solution before.

## **How to handle infected equipment and linen**

HIV can spread through the use of syringes, needles and instruments, which have been in contact with the blood of a person with HIV, even if she/he is not sick. It is therefore important to use sterile syringes, needles and other instruments. The virus is very fragile and dies at only 56°C, or when soaked in common disinfectants.

There are 3 ways to sterilize equipment:

1. boiling for 20 minutes
2. steam or pressure cooking, autoclaving
3. soaking for 20 minutes in disinfectant solution
  - chlorine 5 gr/litre, or  
1 part household bleach in 10 parts water
  - alcohol, 700 gr ethanol in 1 litre water.

Solutions should be prepared fresh daily as they lose strength over time.

Soiled or bloodstained laundry should be handled with care. To kill the virus it should be washed in plenty of hot water with soap and then hung up and left to dry. HIV cannot survive sunshine and dryness.

## Self-care of Health Personnel

The risk of health personnel getting AIDS through their work is very low. It is important that health workers protect themselves from unnecessary exposure to infection. Handling instruments which have been in contact with infected blood should be done with care. If possible, gloves should be used.

During operations extra long gloves or special arm covers of plastic might be needed.

There is no need to wear special coats, masks or gloves while being with the patient, giving nursing care.

Health personnel should be encouraged to share their experiences and feelings with each other. Support from other members of the community, such as religious leaders or elders, is very important.





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