

# HIV and AIDS

## What is HIV?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. The virus infects cells that help protect the body from disease. When the cells are infected, the body's immune system can become damaged and a person's ability to fight off disease reduced.



Zabiya Kafuko, 16, supported by CAFOD partner, Nsambya Home Care: "The drugs have improved my life and I no longer fall sick like before."

## What is AIDS?

When HIV has damaged a large proportion of the key cells in the body's immune system, a person can no longer fight off illness. AIDS is usually diagnosed when an HIV infected person becomes ill with one or more serious illnesses such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, skin cancer or dementia.

### FACT

A person with HIV stays infected and can pass on the virus for the rest of their life.



## How do people get infected?

HIV is passed on when blood, sexual fluids or breast milk from someone who is HIV positive get inside an uninfected person. The risk of infection therefore increases during:

- › Medical treatment with HIV infected blood or sharing of drug-injecting equipment.
- › Unprotected sex with a person with the virus.
- › Pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding – the virus can be transmitted to the baby during these times if the mother has the virus.

### FACT

33 million people are now living with HIV and AIDS (UKAID 2010)

## Is there a cure?

There is currently no cure for HIV but there have been huge advances in treatment. Special drugs known as 'antiretrovirals' (ARVs) can slow down HIV infection and reduce the amount of virus in the bloodstream.

Many AIDS-related illnesses can also be treated successfully, at least in the short-term. Even when a person has had an AIDS diagnosis, they can still be helped to recover so that they feel healthy.



## HIV and AIDS is a development issue

HIV and AIDS have a huge impact on many developing countries, particularly in parts of Africa:

- › **Orphans.** It is thought that by 2009 there were 16 million children and teenagers who had lost one or both parents to AIDS, with most of these living in sub-Saharan Africa.
- › **Development prevented.** 1.8 million people died because of AIDS in 2009 with 1.3 million deaths in sub-Saharan Africa. This level of burden stifles the development of whole countries; for example, many people are too ill to work or are caring for sick family members.
- › **Treatment.** For every individual who starts treatment each year, two are newly infected with HIV. Expansion in treatment is not keeping pace with the rate of new cases.

(Figures from UNAIDS Global AIDS Epidemic 2010)

## Why have developing countries been hit so badly?

### Poverty

Poverty is at the root of the spread of HIV and AIDS in developing countries. It makes people much more vulnerable in many ways. Illiteracy and lack of education lead to ignorance about the causes of HIV and AIDS. Lack of access to testing facilities means people may not know they have the virus. Women may have to resort to selling sex in order to feed their families. Environments are created where peoples' behaviour is more likely to put them at risk.

### Conflict and emergencies

The risk of HIV and AIDS increases in situations of war or natural disasters. Soldiers sometimes use rape as a weapon of war. Rape is also common in and around refugee camps. Chaos creates situations which put people at risk.

## Stigma

Cultural attitudes or ignorance can make it difficult for people to talk about HIV and AIDS. Secrecy increases the risk of the virus spreading. People with HIV and AIDS and their families may be rejected by their communities.

## Access to treatment

People in developing countries have been unable to get the same treatment as those in wealthier countries. They often have to pay for blood tests and drugs, and cannot afford them. They may be unable to make the journey to a health clinic. Distribution and availability has also been an issue. All of this has meant that people living with HIV are less likely to survive if they live in poor countries.

This situation is changing, slowly. Availability of treatment and drugs has grown. In 2009, 5.2 million people were accessing ARV drugs, compared with 700,000 in 2004 (UNAIDS, 2010). However, nearly twice as many people – 10 million – are waiting for treatment and many people who have been on the drugs for a while need to switch to another combination, which are often more expensive or unavailable. A lot more still needs to be done.

**TRY THIS**

List the reasons why someone living with HIV and AIDS in a developing country might find it more difficult to survive than someone in a wealthy country.

## What CAFOD is doing



We support partners working on a wide range of HIV and AIDS projects. For example:

- In **Cambodia**, CAFOD funds a project which gives allowances for extra food, clothes and medicines to families who foster children orphaned through HIV and AIDS. Some of these children might otherwise be living on the streets.
- In **Zambia**, CAFOD funds an HIV home-care project where volunteers and nurses visit people in the community who are struggling to cope. They help with tasks like feeding the family, fetching water and cleaning as well as emotional support.
- In **Mexico**, CAFOD supports an organisation who provide information to prevent HIV and AIDS, and supports the rights of those living with the virus by working to prevent and document abuses.

## The present and future

Globally the spread of AIDS seems to have peaked. In 2009 the number of new infections was 20 per cent lower than in 1999. AIDS related deaths are down by nearly 20 per cent in the last five years (UNAIDS, 2010). Improved access to treatment and education about the spread of HIV is helping. Incredible milestones are within reach – mothers can be given a preventative drug during labour to reduce the risk of their babies being born with HIV.

However:

- AIDS-related illnesses remain one of the leading causes of deaths in the world
- The number of people living with HIV is increasing worldwide
- Access to treatment is still a major issue despite big improvements – at the end of 2009, only about one third of the people who needed treatment were actually getting it. (UNAIDS, 2010)

Most experts believe that developing an effective, safe and widely available preventative vaccine for HIV may be our best long term hope; this is a difficult challenge. An even bigger challenge is combating the poverty that lies at the heart of the spread of HIV and AIDS in developing countries.

**TRY THIS**

Go to our website, [cafod.org.uk](http://cafod.org.uk), and read the story of someone living with HIV and AIDS

### FACT

Young people (aged 15 to 24) accounted for over 40 per cent of new HIV infections among adults worldwide in 2009 (UN AIDS, 2010)

**TRY THIS**

Write an assembly for World AIDS Day on 1 December to show solidarity with people around the world living with HIV



## Useful websites

**[worldaidsday.org](http://worldaidsday.org)**

World AIDS Day

**[stopaidscampaign.org.uk](http://stopaidscampaign.org.uk)**

'Stop AIDS Campaign' run by the UK Consortium on AIDS and International Development of which CAFOD is a member

**[un.org/millenniumgoals](http://un.org/millenniumgoals)**

United Nations Millennium Development Goals website for up-to-date statistics

**[globalfund.org](http://globalfund.org)**

International finance institution focusing on fighting HIV and AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis

**[e-alliance.ch/en](http://e-alliance.ch/en)**

Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance – group of Christian organisations

**[unaids.org](http://unaids.org)**

United Nations programmes on HIV and AIDS