

# HIV/AIDS & DRUGS



*The vulnerable must be given priority in the response.*

The Declaration of Commitment on HIV/AIDS

Drug users, particularly people who inject drugs, are very vulnerable to HIV infection. In most countries in the region, IDUs (injecting drug users) account for a large percentage of total HIV/AIDS cases. In other words, among IDUs HIV infection rates are very high.

Intravenous drug use very often involves the use or **sharing of contaminated injecting equipment**. People may share contaminated needles because they lack access to their own injecting equipment, because they do not have the money to buy new needles and syringes, or simply because they are not aware of the related risks. This practice should be curbed wherever possible. Preventive education interventions need to include information on the dangers of transmission in relation to injecting drug use.

*Injecting drug use can pave the way for HIV/AIDS into the general population*

The proportion of injecting drug users of the total number of a country's HIV/AIDS cases is well above 50 per cent in many countries of the region. Typically, the share of IDUs in the total number of cases decreases once the virus spreads into the general population. HIV/AIDS may initially affect mostly drug users in certain "pockets" and then spread into different populations, for example, boyfriends or girlfriends of drug users, sex workers, or young people experimenting with using drugs.



- Drug users are highly vulnerable to HIV infection
- They have a right to know how to protect themselves as well as their sexual partners and unborn children
- Harm reduction also means curbing HIV transmission

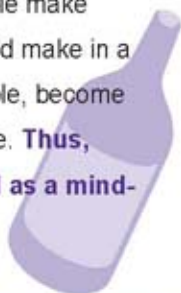
Drug users may also be husbands, wives, mothers, or partners of people who do not use drugs. In other words, sexual and mother-to-child transmission of HIV occur just as much in a population of drug users as in any other population.

## Why HIV/AIDS and injecting drug use are closely linked

Intravenous drug use often involves the use or sharing of contaminated injecting equipment.

- While drug use can be dangerous for many reasons, HIV infection is one of its most serious consequences.
- Injecting a substance directly into the bloodstream is the most efficient mode of transmission of HIV. Therefore it is even more dangerous than unprotected sexual intercourse.
- Injecting drug users often belong to networks or groups that share injecting equipment. Therefore, if only one person is HIV-positive, the whole group can get infected within a very short period of time.
- Drug use is also related to sex work since some drug users may need to offer sex in exchange for drugs or money.
- Especially in prisons and other restrictive settings where it is almost impossible for drug users to acquire clean injecting equipment, HIV can spread very fast. This is particularly true for settings where individuals from previously separate drug user networks come together and start "mixing".

All mind-altering drugs, whether injected or not, can make people more vulnerable to HIV infection. When intoxicated, people make different decisions than they would make in a sober state. They may, for example, become less likely to insist on condom use. **Thus, alcohol can also be considered as a mind-altering drug.**



## How transmission of HIV can be prevented

Abstinence from drug use is clearly the best way to prevent HIV transmission and should therefore be encouraged as much as possible. However, since promoting abstinence and sanctioning drug use are unlikely to curb all use of injecting drugs, alternative ways of preventing HIV transmission have to be found.

The following approaches to preventing HIV transmission among drug users, especially when taken in a complementary way, can have a substantial positive impact:

- ❑ HIV/AIDS education
- ❑ Life skills training
- ❑ Condom distribution
- ❑ Voluntary and confidential counselling and testing (VCCT)
- ❑ Drug abuse treatment
- ❑ Access to clean injecting equipment
- ❑ Access to bleach materials

### What is harm reduction?

Harm reduction is a pragmatic approach to minimising the negative impact of drug abuse rather than relying on complete abstinence. It is a set of practical strategies that reduces negative consequences of social, physical, and economic harm associated with chronic drug problems.

Harm reduction approaches do not condone drug use. While upholding that abstinence is the preferred health goal for those using illicit drugs, it recognises that the immediate public health risks from HIV transmission must be given higher priority. Some people may be unwilling or unable to give up drugs entirely, but harm reduction programmes could still be beneficial to them and to society as a whole. Small improvements can pave the way for further reduction of drug use and an improved lifestyle.