

# 01 BASIC FACTS ABOUT HIV/AIDS

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Today, many people have heard about **HIV/AIDS** – it is a topic in newspapers, on television, in the market place, and on street corners. However, many people still do not know exactly what HIV/AIDS actually means. Many people still do not know how to protect themselves. And there are still widespread misconceptions about HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, there is a considerable gap between knowledge and practice; not all people practice what they have learned in theory.

In order to come up with a creative and effective response to HIV/AIDS, it is essential to have basic knowledge about the disease and the epidemic. It is also essential to master the skills needed to prevent yourself from getting HIV.

HIV is short for **human immuno-deficiency virus**. Once infected with HIV, a person is said to be HIV positive. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have AIDS. AIDS, or **acquired immune deficiency syndrome**, can take many years to develop. An HIV positive person can feel and look healthy for a long time after first becoming infected. Eventually, the virus kills or impairs more and more cells in the body's immune system and the body loses the ability to fight off common infections and diseases. People with AIDS die from diseases that are usually not dangerous for people with healthy immune systems.

In some countries, there is medical treatment available that can slow down the rate at which HIV weakens the immune system. There are other treatments that can prevent or cure some of the illnesses associated with AIDS. As with other diseases, early detection offers more options for treatment and preventative care. However, HIV can never be cured – only its progression to AIDS can be slowed down.

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- **AIDS does not discriminate – everybody is vulnerable**
- **Only semen, vaginal fluids, blood, and breast milk of an infected person can transmit HIV/AIDS**
- **Living with an HIV-positive person does not transmit the disease**



## How is HIV spread?

HIV/AIDS does not discriminate. Everyone is vulnerable to HIV, regardless of age, nationality, or sex, and regardless of social status.

HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, is spread through four bodily fluids: **blood, semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk**. The virus can only be spread from an infected person if his or her bodily fluids enter the bloodstream of an uninfected person. There are three ways of transmission:

- ➔ **Sex** - Unprotected sexual contact with an infected partner – be it vaginal, oral, or anal - is the most common method of HIV transmission.
- ➔ **Blood** - By sharing unsterilised needles or syringes with an HIV positive person, for example, when using drugs or in a healthcare setting, or through blood transfusions with infected blood.
- ➔ **Mother-to-Child** - During pregnancy or birth and through breastfeeding from an HIV positive mother to her baby.

### A few words about Parent-to-child transmission...

Women can transmit the virus to their babies during pregnancy, labour and delivery, or through breastfeeding. This often reinforces stigma and discrimination against HIV+ women since the blame for infecting the child is solely put on the mother. That the mother is usually infected by the father of the child is commonly neglected. Therefore, talking about parent-to-child transmission (PTCT) rather than mother-to-child transmission (MTCT) better recognises the roles and responsibilities of of both parents in protecting themselves and their families against HIV infection.


## HIV CANNOT be transmitted:

- ❑ Through air or by coughing and sneezing
- ❑ Through food or water
- ❑ Through sweat and tears
- ❑ By sharing cups, plates, and utensils with an infected person
- ❑ By touching, hugging, and kissing an infected person
- ❑ By sharing clothes or shaking hands with an infected person
- ❑ By sharing toilets and bathrooms with an infected person
- ❑ By living with an infected person
- ❑ By mosquitoes, fleas, or other insects

## The HIV/AIDS epidemic today

In 2003, 40 million adults and children were living with HIV/AIDS worldwide.

Even so, UNAIDS warns that the AIDS epidemic is still in an early phase. HIV prevalence is climbing higher than previously believed possible in the worst-affected countries and is continuing to spread rapidly into new populations in other parts of the world.



*The global epidemic is a global emergency and one of the most formidable challenges to life and dignity, to the enjoyment of human rights, and to economic development. It affects all levels of society, from nations to individuals.*