

HIV/AIDS in East-central Africa

The region of the world where HIV/AIDS is presently particularly widespread is East-central Africa. In the middle 1990's, in six East-central African countries, slightly more than 200,000 people were officially reported to be HIV patients. It is believed that these figures vastly underestimate the actual number by about seven to ten times. This suggests that between 1.4 million to 2 million people in the region may be infected. Within certain groups in East-central Africa, 30% rates of HIV/AIDS infection are not uncommon. Over 80% of babies born around the world with HIV-infection are born in Africa; most die before their second birthday.

Typical features of life in East-central Africa

- Several countries in the area were, in the past, colonies of European countries.
- Most contain competing religions. Most contain important tribal distinctions.
- Many people in the region lack information regarding sexuality and STD's (sexually transmitted diseases).
- Many people lack high school levels of general education. For most people, there is a lack of access to higher education or to expert training levels. Local government officials are not well educated for their jobs and can be inefficient.
- In part because of the historical and current social arrangements noted above, there is little access to high-level jobs for most people, especially women.
- In towns, lower level jobs are most often held by men from surrounding villages. Thus, there exists a two-way migration of males from village to town and town to village as the men go to and from their jobs. This weakens family ties and encourages sexual activity outside the home.
- Women have few opportunities to obtain money—hence prostitution is often seen as the only way for them to get money.
- There are, in some areas, religious or tribal taboos against dealing publicly with sexual matters.
- Health systems in the region are under funded, sometimes because countries have military

governments which spend money on arms, not on social services. In the poorer countries, as little as \$3 (U.S.) per person per year is spent by governments on health and social services.

- Health services have followed “curative” (try to cure people after they are sick) not “preventive” models of operation. They are not well organized to prevent the occurrence of new diseases.

Factors contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS

- Lack of education and opportunities for employment keeps people poor.
- There is widespread lack of understanding of health and threats to it.
- Women often lack control over their lives.
- The two-way migration spreads HIV/AIDS both to and from town and village.
- Lack of education and taboos against sex education discourages efforts to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS; some religious groups in the countries of East-central Africa oppose certain forms of sex education.
- Sometimes church officials oppose education about practices such as the use of condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS.
- Economies of the countries are typically in difficulty. Political upheaval is common. The countries typically have inadequate resources: for some jurisdictions, dealing with HIV/AIDS patients can take up to 40% of their annual budgets. The “drug cocktail” is too expensive for most people in the region.

HIV/AIDS—a modern plague

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is a submicroscopic parasite that can only survive and reproduce inside the cells of a host organism. AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is a weakening of the body's ability to fight off diseases. If HIV gets into a person's blood system, the person may develop AIDS. Thus, the epidemic is called "HIV/AIDS." According to the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention:

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by sharing needles and/or syringes (primarily for drug injection) with someone who is infected or, less commonly (and now very rarely in countries where blood is screened for HIV antibodies), through transfusions of infected blood or blood clotting factors. Babies born to HIV-infected women may become infected before or during birth or through breast-feeding after birth.

HIV/AIDS is a sexually transmitted disease (STD); it can weaken or destroy the body's ability to fight off diseases.

Combined antiviral therapy (also called the "drug cocktail") is one of the more important recent advances in treatment of HIV/AIDS, but the treatment is not a cure. No person, once infected, has had HIV/AIDS successfully eliminated from his or her body. The drug cocktail for HIV/AIDS is expensive. There is, at present, no known cure for HIV/AIDS. Experimental trials of vaccines are currently being conducted.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention reports the following worldwide statistics:

- By the end of 2002, an estimated 42 million people were living with HIV/AIDS. Of these, 3.2 million are children under 15.
- Approximately 5 million people acquired HIV in 2002.
- During 2002, AIDS killed an estimated 3.1 million people, including 1.2 million women and 610,000 children under 15.

Symptoms associated with HIV/AIDS

HIV/AIDS is unlike Black Death in that it acts less like a disease itself and more like a gatekeeper which opens the body of a person to a range of infections. In healthy people these infections would previously have been prevented by the body's immune system. A great variety of illnesses and symptoms can be indications that a person has HIV/AIDS. Because it can be associated with so many differing symptoms, it took researchers years before the existence of HIV/AIDS was generally recognized. As of 1999 about two dozen diseases have been found to be "AIDS-defining"—that is, they are taken as strong indicators of the presence of HIV/AIDS.

Physical and psychological problems associated with HIV/AIDS

People with HIV/AIDS suffer a great range of discomforts:

- painful infections,
- failure of body systems,
- eye infections and sight failures,
- difficulties in swallowing, intestinal pains and failings,
- blood vessel tumors,
- rashes,
- painful swelling of lymph organs,
- dementia (Alzheimer-like decline in mind functions),
- cancers,
- loss of weight, strength and energy,
- great mental stress,
- stigma, when people appear to be visibly ill with the disease.

Summary of key facts

Black Death

HIV/AIDS

Summarize important information from reports by groups on each of the topics below. Add important relevant information obtained from other sources (e.g., books, websites).

Physical effects

Prevention and treatment

What people first knew or believed

What is known today

Social effects

Economic effects

Other important effects or information

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