

■ Responding to AIDS and the Workplace

The World Health Organization (WHO), in cooperation with the International Labour Office (ILO), held a consultation in Geneva in June 1988 on AIDS and the workplace. Experts from governments, trade unions and employers as well as from the public health, medical, legal and health education sectors agreed unanimously that two fundamental principles should guide global policies toward workers with HIV infection (and AIDS):

- Workers with HIV infection who are healthy should be treated the same way as any other workers;
- Workers who are ill and HIV-infected (such as workers with AIDS) should be treated the same as any other worker with an illness.

■ Other issues

- **Screening:** Since HIV infection by itself does not affect a worker's ability to perform a job, and an infected person cannot transmit infection to co-workers casually, employment or pre-employment testing or screening is unnecessary and should not be required. (Screening in this setting means either a direct method [the blood test] or an indirect method [asking a job applicant about his or her risk behaviours or previous blood tests for HIV].)
- **Informing co-workers:** Like all medical information, information on whether someone is infected with HIV or has AIDS should be kept confidential. Again, there is no risk of becoming infected from co-workers unless you have sexual intercourse or share needles with them.
- **Informing employers:** There should be no obligation for an employee to inform the employer about his or her HIV/AIDS status. An HIV-infected person does not normally pose a risk to others in the workplace.
- **Work arrangements or assignments:** Since HIV infection by itself does not limit fitness to work, no changes in working arrangements are necessary. But if an employee becomes impaired by illness related to HIV, reasonable alternative work arrangements should be made - to help the worker stay on the job.
- **Dismissal:** HIV infection is not a reason for terminating employment. Persons with HIV-related illnesses should be able to work as long as they are medically fit for available, appropriate work.
- **Benefits:** HIV-infected employees should receive work-related remuneration and allowances, including social security and social insurance benefits, to which they would otherwise be entitled.

- **Education:** Because information and education are vital in the fight against AIDS, workers and their families should have access to information and educational programmes on HIV and AIDS free of charge. They should also have access to appropriate counselling and referral to other courses of assistance and information about HIV and AIDS.
- **Discrimination:** Workers who are HIV-infected, or who are believed to be HIV-infected, must be protected from any discrimination or stigmatization by co-workers, unions, employers, or clients. Information and education are essential to help make sure that HIV-infected workers will be accepted without prejudice. There is no reason to fear people who are HIV-infected or have AIDS. They need our support to help them with the physical and emotional difficulties they face.
- **Workplace Policy:** Workers should be consulted by employers in the development and implementation of policy in relation to HIV infection and AIDS.

Prospects for the future

Some day, doctors and researchers may provide us with a vaccine that will prevent the spread of HIV, or a drug that can cure HIV infection or AIDS. Until then, we must rely on personal behaviour to prevent the spread of HIV. Workers everywhere can help stop AIDS, by making sure of the facts, and helping others to do the same. The risk of AIDS is not about who you are or where you are. AIDS is about what you do. Knowing the facts about AIDS can prevent its spread. So join the worldwide effort to stop AIDS - in the workplace and at home.



The World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization are specialised agencies of the United Nations system. For more information about AIDS, contact your local health care provider or health authorities.

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AIDS

and the Workplace

What you need to know about AIDS



World Health Organization



International Labour Office

Introduction

■ No matter where you work or live, you need to know about AIDS.

AIDS is a new worldwide problem which was first recognized in 1981. By mid-1990, over 250,000 cases of AIDS have already been reported from more than 150 countries, in every part of the world. All groups and communities can be affected by AIDS because the virus that causes it can cross all boundaries, political and social. Worldwide, an estimated 6 to 8 million people are already infected with the virus (HIV) that causes AIDS. By the year 2000, both the number of persons infected with the virus as well as the number of people suffering from AIDS are expected to increase markedly.

Many workers around the world know about AIDS. But you may still have many questions. Since work plays such an important role in our lives, it's only natural that many of these questions centre around the workplace. Here, in a concise form are the facts from the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Office (ILO) — the world's leading authorities on health and labour. These are the basics that workers and employers, and their families and friends must know about AIDS in order to help prevent this disease.

The Basics

■ What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. It is the last stage of infection with a recently discovered virus called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV.

Most people infected with HIV are still healthy and can live for years with no symptoms or with only minor illnesses. They are infected with HIV, but they do *not* have AIDS.

With time, HIV attacks the body's immune system, or natural defensive mechanism, leaving a person unprotected against infections. In the next stage, many people infected with HIV become ill as their immune systems are weakened more and more by the virus.

Only when certain very serious infections or cancers occur in a person infected with HIV is that person diagnosed as having AIDS. As far as we know now, AIDS is a fatal disease, although there are treatments that can prolong life. So far, there is no cure, nor is there any preventive vaccine known to the medical world.

■ If someone is infected with HIV, but doesn't have the disease AIDS, can they infect others?

Yes. Though a person may not be diagnosed with AIDS, the virus (HIV) stays in the body for life. Therefore, for example, even though someone doesn't show outward symptoms of having the disease AIDS or being infected with HIV, they can unknowingly pass HIV on to their sexual partner.

■ How do I know if I'm infected, or have AIDS? Is there an AIDS test?

The diagnosis of AIDS can only be made with a complete medical and laboratory examination. What people commonly call an "AIDS test" is really a blood test to determine whether a person is infected with the virus (HIV). When a test is positive, it means that a person has been infected with the virus. But that still does not mean they have the disease AIDS.

■ How does HIV spread?

HIV can be spread through sexual intercourse — vaginal, anal, oral — from any infected person to his or her sexual partner. (Men can spread HIV sexually to men and women, and women can spread it sexually to men and possibly to women.) The virus is also spread by infected blood — in transfusions, on needles (especially with needle-sharing among drug users) or on any skin-piercing instruments. Also, an HIV-infected mother can transmit the virus to her foetus or infant.

■ How can people protect themselves against HIV and AIDS?

To reduce the risk of contracting HIV infection from a sexual partner, you can avoid sexual intercourse or have sex only with a faithful, uninfected partner. People should avoid multiple sex partners because reducing the number of sexual partners will lower the risk of exposure to the virus. If in doubt, men should always use a condom, each time, from start to finish, and women should make sure their partner uses one. If you inject drugs — no matter what kind — never use anyone else's equipment.

■ Can AIDS be spread in the workplace?

No. In the vast majority of occupations, work does not involve any risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV from one worker to another, from a worker to a client, or from a client to a worker. We know that HIV is spread in only three ways: sexual intercourse, through the blood, and from an infected mother to her foetus or infant.

HIV is not spread by daily and routine workplace activities, such as sitting next to someone, shaking hands, or working with others. HIV is not spread by insects or insect bites. HIV cannot be spread in swimming pools or by sharing public transportation, cups, glasses, plates, or eating utensils, in food, water or air, on toilets, or by touching, hugging, coughing or sneezing.

Still, in a limited number of occupations, such as work in the health sector, there may be some risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV. Such workers should receive special education and training and appropriate precautionary measures should be applied.

■ Is there a risk of becoming infected with HIV when providing first aid?

First aid treatment which involves contact with blood presents a very small risk of transmission of HIV (and other infections, such as Hepatitis B) from an infected person. There are no reported cases of HIV infection being transmitted by mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. When providing first aid, you can minimize the possibility of infection by following these rules:

■ A co-worker who is unconscious and not breathing requires mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Mouth-to-mouth resuscitation is a life-saving procedure and should not be withheld due to a fear of contracting HIV or other infection.

■ If a person is bleeding from the mouth, use a clean cloth or other suitable material to wipe away any blood. Don't use mouthpieces, resuscitation bags or other ventilation bags unless you are specially trained in their use. The absence of such equipment is no reason to withhold mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

■ Co-workers who are bleeding require immediate attention. Don't hesitate to help a bleeding co-worker since some wounds may be life-threatening. The flow of blood can be stopped by putting pressure on a wound using suitable material like a clean cloth. Gloves should be used if available. Always wash your hands and any other parts of the body splashed or exposed to blood with soap and water. (Mucous membranes, such as in your mouth, or eyes, should be rinsed with water only.)

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