



Young people and HIV/AIDS

Carrying a disproportionate burden

HIV/AIDS – A global catastrophe

The AIDS epidemic is a global catastrophe responsible for over 20 million deaths, tens of millions of children left orphaned, and some 40 million people living with HIV. A quarter of a century since it was first identified, the epidemic continues to spread throughout much of the world: In 2006 alone, an estimated 4.3 million became newly infected with HIV. At this pace, HIV/AIDS will take more lives than any other infectious disease in history.

Young people - representing about 18 per cent of the world's total population - are at the centre of the global AIDS epidemic. An estimated 11.8 million aged 15-24 are living with HIV/AIDS, and half of all new infections occur in young people the same age. Each day, almost 6,000 young people contract the virus; yet only a fraction of them know they are infected. Young women are especially vulnerable to HIV infection and disproportionately affected by the epidemic.

Why are young people so at risk?

During adolescence, young people naturally explore and take risks in many aspects of their lives, including sexual relationships. Those who have sex may change partners frequently, have more than one partner in the same time period or engage in unprotected sex. All of these behaviours increase young people's risk of contracting HIV.

However, young people's, and particularly young women's, heightened vulnerability to HIV infection has roots not only in their sexual and marital behaviour, but also in the broader social, cultural and economic conditions they face in their lives. Evidence shows that HIV spreads fastest and furthest in conditions of poverty, powerlessness and lack of information and education – conditions in which many young people live. Worldwide, the AIDS epidemic is most severe in the poorest countries.



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This holds true for sub-Saharan Africa, a region more devastated by HIV/AIDS than any other in the world. Here, the epidemic is taking an enormous toll on young people: Nearly 9 million women and men aged 15–24 are living with HIV/AIDS.

Across sub-Saharan Africa, prevalence among young women is about as twice that among men. Their risk of contracting HIV is especially high. Women are biologically more susceptible to HIV infection than men. Social and gender inequalities and practices create added risks for young women and undermine their ability to protect their sexual and reproductive health.

What needs to be done?

Young people are key to defeating the AIDS epidemic. Preventing young people from acquiring HIV is the only way to halt and reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Sexual and reproductive health information and education can play a key role in preventing HIV infection. Young people can only make safer choices to protect themselves if they know the basic facts about HIV/AIDS. Studies from around the globe testify to an alarming degree of misinformation and knowledge about the disease, resulting in misconceptions that lead young people to underestimate the risk of infection.

Young people also need access to services fundamental to their healthy development. Among these are youth-friendly health services and supplies for HIV/AIDS prevention and care, including condoms and voluntary counselling and testing. Even though most people become sexually active during adolescence, young people often have difficulty obtaining condoms and many do not know how to use them properly.

An enabling environment is a prerequisite for young people to obtain the necessary knowledge, life skills and access to services. Empowering young people to abstain as a choice, delay sexual initiation, reject unwanted advances, as well as providing them with access to condoms, knowledge of their proper use and the ability to negotiate safer sex, can, taken together, make the difference between life and death.



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