

AIDS OVERVIEW

In November 1991, [Magic Johnson](#) stunned the nation with this announcement:

Because of the HIV virus I have obtained, I will have to announce my retirement from the Lakers today. Before I was married, I truly lived a bachelor's life...as I traveled around NBA cities...I did my best to accommodate as many women as I could—most of them through unprotected sex...

Diver Greg Louganis was found to be HIV-positive in March 1988, five months before the Olympic Games in Seoul. He went on to win two more Olympic gold medals. "I'm more afraid of getting sick than dying," he says now. Louganis, who suffered a colon infection in 1993 and lost 35 pounds, adds, "The pain, discomfort, deterioration—that scares me more than anything."

Inner city youth were shocked when Eric Wright entered [Cedars-Sinai Hospital](#) with AIDS in the spring of 1995 and died ten days later. Easy-E, as Wright was known, started N.W.A ([Niggaz With Attitude](#)), was 31, and fathered seven children by six women. From his hospital bed, he warned young people that AIDS "doesn't discriminate." Like Magic, he emphasized that anyone can get the virus. More urban youth seemed to identify with Easy-E and hear his message. Seventeen-year-old Mark Jeeter said Easy's death "blew my mind away. It made me really realize that if you go around having sex with different people, you're going to end up like him." Mike Johnson, fourteen, added, "I was like, damn, I'd better chill out," and promised to cut back on the number of his sexual partners. (Newsweek, 10 April 1995)

HIV AND AIDS

Every day 700 people in the world are newly infected with HIV/AIDS and 1500 people die from AIDS. More people died from AIDS in 1998 than in any other year since the epidemic was discovered in 1981. Here are the figures for global AIDS according to the World Health Organization and UN Program on AIDS:

- New HIV infections in 1998: 5.6 million
- People with HIV/AIDS in 1999: 33.6 million
- AIDS-related deaths in 1999 (est.): 2.6 million
- AIDS-related deaths since 1981(est.): 16.3 million
- Of the 5.6 million new HIV infections of 1999
- At least 4 million of these were in Africa.
- Half, or at least 2 million among young people, 15-24 years of age.
- Well over half or 1 million of these young women.

In Africa, HIV is spread mostly by heterosexual activity and women are becoming infected at much higher rates than men. Some African leaders recognize and admit that AIDS is now a greater threat to their country than other serious problems—hunger, overpopulation, other diseases such as malaria, and war. In some countries prevention programs are beginning to show positive results.

In other African countries there seems to be a denial of the problem. South Africa has one of the highest rates of infection in the world, and yet President Thabo Mbeki stopped use of the antiretroviral drug AZT to pregnant women on the ground that the drug is toxic. The best evidence, however, shows that proper dosages of AZT will prevent the transmission of AIDS from mothers to their fetuses. [Glaxo-Wellcome](#), manufacturer of the drug, even agreed to cut the price of AZT sold in Africa by 75 percent for a trial period of five years.

So severe is the AIDS epidemic in Africa, that its life-expectancy figure is estimated to drop from a high of 59 years in the early 1990s to 45 years in the next five years.

AIDS is a fatal condition caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). HIV attacks and kills certain cells of the body, especially those that protect from disease. When too many of these cells have been destroyed, the body becomes weak and a person becomes sick. A person with HIV is susceptible to serious diseases that healthy people do not typically get, such as [cytomegalovirus](#) (CMV), [tuberculosis](#) (TB), [Pneumocystis carinii](#) (PCP), [toxoplasmosis](#), and [mycobacterium avium](#) (MAC). When a person with HIV develops one of these diseases, the person is said to have AIDS.

Testing positive for HIV means that your blood has signs of the virus that

can cause AIDS. A positive test for HIV does not mean that a person has AIDS. Many people who test positive for HIV do not get symptoms of AIDS for eight to ten years, or longer, from the time they contract the virus. HIV is carried mainly in the blood, semen, and vaginal secretions of an infected person. The virus is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by needle-sharing among injecting drug users, or, less commonly and even rarely now, through transfusions of infected blood or blood clotting factor. Babies born to HIV-infected women may become infected before, during, or shortly after birth. Scientific evidence shows that HIV cannot be transmitted by casual contact, vaccines, or insects.

According to the CDC, there is an epidemic of HIV infection—not just the endstage disease, AIDS. In addition to the tens of thousands diagnosed with AIDS, many suffer from medical conditions related to HIV infection, while still others are infected but show no symptoms. Because of the long incubation period from HIV infection to AIDS, the primary focus for prevention must ultimately be on the early diagnosis and referral to medical care of HIV-infected persons.

SYMPTOMS AND DISEASE TRANSFER

People with HIV can develop many opportunistic infections (Ois). Many of these illnesses are very serious and need to be treated. Some can be prevented. The following can be signs of infection:

- Diarrhea.
- Cough.
- Sores.
- Persistent or severe headaches.
- Fatigue.
- Fever
- Weight loss.
- Blurred vision.
- Vaginal discharge, burning, or itching that does not go away.
- Irregular menstrual bleeding or abdominal pain that does not go away.

To prevent the spread of the infection, avoid behavior that might result in contact with blood, semen, vaginal secretions, or body fluids of an infected

person. AIDS can be prevented by abstaining from sexual activity or by having a monogamous relationship with an uninfected and faithful partner, and by avoiding IV drug abuse or using only sterilized needles. Those engaging in sexual activity beyond a monogamous relationship should always use a condom, limit the number of sex partners, and ask sex partners about their health.

Healthy lifestyles help prevent the spread of AIDS. There are some conditions that tend to weaken the body's immune system and make a person more susceptible to AIDS. They are:

- Sexual promiscuity and having any sexually transmitted disease.
- Malnutrition.
- Excessive use of alcohol and drugs.
- Excessive stress.
- Lack of exercise and rest.
- Smoking.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What impressed you most from this article?
- What questions does this article raise for you?
- Does this article provide enough information to begin a discussion in your class or youth group?
- What facts do you most want to present to young people and what issues or principles will make the most significant discussion?

IMPLICATIONS

- Along with understanding the facts about HIV and AIDS, it is crucial to consider the suffering of its victims and those who fear for their loved one's deterioration.
- World, national, and personal concern must replace fear, apathy, or condemnation if AIDS is to be combatted effectively. Otherwise, all people face an unprecedented world-wide scourge reminiscent of Europe's black plague.
- Teenagers are becoming an increasingly high-risk group. Young people are in danger and will soon be young adults. They need the proper kind of discussion and consideration about this life-and-death issue.

- Because no suitable cure for HIV or AIDS exists, education will be the key weapon against further spread of the epidemic. Some young people have never had a thorough, personal discussion of this issue.

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