

When were you last tested for HIV?

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Perhaps you are fortunate not to be one of the 720,000 (in Western and Central Europe) or 1.5 million persons (in Eastern Europe) living with HIV/AIDS, but for how long can we remain touched by the spreading epidemic? HIV remains one of the most important communicable diseases in Europe. It is an infection associated with serious morbidity, high costs of treatment and care, significant mortality and shortened life expectancy. Infection with HIV occurs via the transfer of infected blood, semen, vaginal fluid and breast milk. HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by sharing needles 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. The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) attacks the immune system and causes a lifelong severe illness with a long incubation period.¹

Each year in Europe over 20,000 individuals are becoming infected and in most cases these are young people and people in working age. HIV infection continually appears in new guises and population groups, popping up in remote villages and crowded cities, infecting and affecting entire societies. Often the disease infiltrates a population via a high-risk group, such as homosexual and bisexual individuals, sex workers or injecting drug users. Statistics for Europe, however, show that the predominant mode of transmission on this continent is heterosexual, which means that everyone is vulnerable.

Should we do something about it?

Recently the European Commission published a memo posing questions and suggesting answers on EU action aimed at fighting HIV/AIDS. Key areas for action include: combating stigma and discrimination through capacity-building among health care workers and NGOs, promotion of voluntary counselling and testing and awareness raising; prevention of new infections through education, awareness raising and facilitating the implementation of comprehensive prevention programmes reaching also the most vulnerable populations; improving HIV/AIDS surveillance, etc. Since HIV/AIDS primarily affects the working-age population, it therefore has a direct impact on companies that might have economic consequences in the form of increased labour costs owing to sickness of employees or their family members, lower productivity, etc. The active involvement of business is critically important for the future attempts at more effective collaboration among stake-holders.

On a personal level, however, we need to be much more proactive and try to protect ourselves and our society from the spread of the HIV/AIDS threat. We need to educate ourselves to be persistent in eschewing unsafe sex practices, we need to teach our children to be responsible for themselves and for their friends, we need to have an active debate on the issues related to the disease and its implications for our lives and family relationships. We need to be proactive and not wait to be personally affected before raising our voice. We need to be well informed and therefore, campaigns and awareness initiatives should not target only high risk groups but the population

Reliable and widely-disseminated information may help reduce psychological, economic and physical repercussions of HIV infection. We, as tax-payers and health-care consumers, need to push our governments to provide effective prevention for all of us, equal access to effective treatment for those who are HIV-positive, adequate protection of human and health rights and counseling services.

Why it is important to actively fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS?

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/health/ph_threats/com/aids/aids_en.htm

Achieving good health as an output requires the contribution of individuals and society. The value of good health and health protection is acknowledged as one of the fundamental goals of the European Union. In the words of Amartya Sen,² health, like education, is among the basic capabilities that give value to human life. Good health is consistently ranked as the number one desire of people around the world.³ Good health is the very foundation of thriving modern societies and economies and is an essential precursor for economic success.⁴ Being healthy depends on government policies, on life style and, last but not least, on our own will to invest more time, resources and personal energy.

Given the prospect of an aging Europe, we need to protect our younger generation from being infected by HIV/AIDS. This is a task for all citizens – as parents, teachers, medical specialists, and simply as members of society. And we have to serve as an example for young people and try to overcome the fear to have ourselves tested, to be more responsible for our own future and that of the next generation.

In conclusion, on this 1st day of December, which has been declared World AIDS Day, let's make a commitment to try to overcome the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS, to be more open, acceptable and communicative on the issue and avoid unnecessary fears and misunderstandings.

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² A. Sen (1999), *Development as freedom*, Anchor Books, Random House, Inc.

³ Survey commissioned for the Millennium Summit of the United Nations and K. Annan (2000), UN Secretary General's Millennium Report, New York: United Nations.

⁴ Byrne, D., (2004), *Enabling good health for all. A reflection process for a new EU health strategy*, European Commission.