

Exploring the Link Between Water and HIV

On 1 December the world will celebrate the 20th anniversary of World Aids Day. The theme for this year is 'leadership' to encourage leaders at all levels to stop the disease.

HIV infection has reached epidemic proportions. According to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), AIDS has killed more than 25 million people since it was first recognised on 1 December, 1981, making it one of the most destructive pandemics in recorded history. It is estimated that about 0,6% of the world's population is infected with HIV. Last year about 2,7 million people were newly-infected. More than 6 000 lives are lost every day to the disease.

AIDS IN SOUTH AFRICA

AIDS continues to be the leading cause of death in Africa which is home to 67% of all people living with HIV. In Africa, 60% living with HIV are women and three out of four young people living with HIV are female.

South Africa has one of the highest prevalence of HIV in the world. While the epidemic seems to have stabilised in South Africa a significant proportion of people in the country are living with the disease. At present, the country has an estimated 5,7 million people living with HIV.

According to the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC), HIV prevalence by province shows that among people aged two years and older KwaZulu-Natal (16,5%), Mpumalanga



HIV strikes people across lines of race, gender and social standing, however, informal settlements have been shown to have the highest incidence of HIV.

(15,2%) and Free State (12,6%) have the most people living with HIV. Among those aged between 15 and 49 the HIV prevalence is highest in Mpumalanga and KwaZulu-Natal. People living in informal settlements have by far the highest HIV prevalence.

AIDS & WATER

AIDS is not a water-related disease, and HIV is not spread via contaminated water or poor hygiene. Yet there is a more important link between HIV/AIDS and water than people realise.

Easy access to safe and sufficient water and sanitation is indispensable for people living with HIV/AIDS. Diarrhoea and skin diseases are among the most common opportunistic infections in people living with the disease. For some patients, diarrhoea can become chronic, weakening them even more.

In order for HIV-infected people to remain healthy as long as possible and for people with AIDS to reduce their chances of getting diarrhoea and skin diseases, adequate water supply and sanitation facilities are of the utmost importance, especially if people do not have access to antiretroviral treatment. Clean water is also needed to take medicines.

Good-quality water is also crucial for HIV-positive mothers who cannot breastfeed their babies for fear of infecting them. Unsafe water used in infants' feed increases the risk of diarrhoeal diseases and infant mortality.

ONLINE RESOURCES

Aids Foundation South Africa (www.aids.org.za)
Human Sciences Research Council (www.hsrc.ac.za/Media_Release-256.phtml)
South African Department of Health (www.doh.gov.za)
Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HIV>)
Treatment Action Campaign (www.tac.org.za)
Water Research Commission HIV/AIDS DVD for councillors (http://www.wrc.org.za/hiv_water_vid.htm)
International Water & Sanitation Centre (<http://www2.irc.nl/page.php/114>)

WHAT IS AIDS?

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is the final and most serious stage of HIV disease, which causes severe damage to the immune system. Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) causes AIDS. The virus attacks the immune system and leaves the body vulnerable to a variety of life-threatening infections. Common bacteria, yeast, parasites and viruses that ordinarily do not cause serious disease in people with healthy immune systems can cause fatal illnesses in people with AIDS.

The virus can be transmitted: through sexual contact, through blood (for example, through the sharing of needles), and from mother to child (for example through breastfeeding). HIV is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, by touching items previously touched by a person infected with the virus, during participation in sports or by mosquitoes.

There is no cure for AIDS at this time. However, a variety of treatments are available that can help keep symptoms at bay and improve the quality of life of those who have already developed symptoms, for example, antiretroviral therapy.

Source: www.healthline.com



Chris Kirchhoff/Media Club SA

We all need to be educated about HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS FACTS AND FIGURES

- ◆ South Africa has the sixth-highest prevalence of HIV in the world, with 28% of the population estimated to be infected.
- ◆ Women face a greater risk of HIV infection. On average in South Africa there are three women infected with HIV for every two men who are infected. The difference is greatest in the 15-24 age group, where three young women for every one young man are infected.
- ◆ HIV in children is high. Approximately 130 000 children aged between two and four and about 214 000 children between five and nine are HIV positive. Most of them have had HIV since birth.

In South Africa, home-based caregivers provide critical support for people who are HIV infected. They require up to 200 litres of water per day for every patient. Water is needed to bath patients and for washing soiled clothing and linen. Finally, water is needed to keep the house environment and toilet clean in order to reduce the risk of opportunistic infections.

QUALITY SERVICES WITHIN REACH

For people weakened by disease it also becomes important that water-supply points and toilets are easily accessible and close to where they are needed. This not only reduces the burden of long-distance water collection, for example, fetching water on caregivers or those who are weak. Critically too, it cuts the risk of girls and women being attacked while fetching water or relieving themselves in remote places, and thus reduces vulnerability to infection with HIV.

In addition, the design of water-supply and sanitation infrastructure needs to take into account, for example, those fetching water are now children or older people who have particular requirements (pump handles not too high, pumping not too heavy, etc). This is because water collection tasks are increasingly falling on children and the elderly as a consequence of AIDS. Toilet structures, on the other hand, need to be big enough to accommodate more than one person (for example, when weakened patients require assistance to go to the toilet).



WHERE DOES THE RED RIBBON COME FROM?

The Red Ribbon was created in 1991 by the Visual AIDS Artists Caucus in New York, USA. It has since become the international symbol of HIV and AIDS awareness. People wear the ribbon to demonstrate their care and concern about the disease. It is also a symbol of hope – that the search for a vaccine and cure to halt the suffering is successful and the quality of life improves for those living with the virus.

Source: UNAID