



# HIV/AIDS, THE KILLER DISEASE

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**T**he killer disease HIV/AIDS continues to cut down many lives with no sign of stopping. To date, there are about 25,000 persons living with HIV/AIDS in Jamaica, and there are still young persons, who are sexually active, who still do not know much or anything about AIDS. Others who do know about the virus are misguided, as they often know about the myths, and not the facts, surrounding HIV/AIDS.

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) and AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) are both viruses which attack the human immune system, the body's defence against unknown or invading diseases. (You can get AIDS when HIV destroys your body's immune system). People infected with the HIV/AIDS virus are more likely to become ill from infections and diseases that healthy persons usually can fight.

Contracting the HIV/AIDS virus is simple. HIV is found in the blood and other bodily fluids and can be spread by having unprotected sex. It does not matter if it's your first time. Sharing needles or injection equipment without proper sterilization is also one way to contract the disease. This means sharing a needle with an HIV infected person to inject drugs, including insulin or steroids. The virus can also be passed on from an HIV infected woman to her baby during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding.

Some people with HIV may feel healthy. Others may have symptoms that include unexplained tiredness, swollen glands in the neck, armpits and groin. Other symptoms are dry cough or shortness of breath, fever, chills and night sweats, unexplained weight loss, persistent diarrhea or unusual spots on the skin or in the mouth. However, remember, these symptoms are common in other illnesses as well. If these symptoms don't go away, you should see a doctor.

People with HIV can develop signs of infection anywhere from months to years after being infected. About half of the people with HIV develop AIDS within 10 years, but the time between infection with HIV and the onset of AIDS can vary greatly.

Unfortunately, many people with HIV/AIDS show no signs of infection. Therefore, it is very important that you protect yourselves at all times. The most popular way of protecting oneself is by the use of condoms, although it is

said and widely known that the best way to prevent the spread of any STD is abstaining. But if you are sexually active, reach for the condom. This can prevent the spread of not only the HIV/AIDS virus, but many other diseases. Check the expiration date on the condom. Don't keep a condom in your wallet or pocket for more than a few days. Your body heat can weaken it.

Avoid drugs and alcohol because they can increase your chances of infection and can lead to risky behaviours. Never share needles or injection equipment. Sharing needles to inject drugs, hormones, insulin or steroids even once can transmit HIV.

## JAS

For people infected with the HIV/AIDS virus, there are a number of places they can go to or call if they are looking for help. This help can come in the form of finance, medication, legal and emotional guidance. One such place is the Jamaica AIDS Support (JAS). They have offices located in Kingston, Montego Bay and Ocho Rios.

JAS is dedicated to preserving the dignity and rights of persons living with HIV/AIDS, and to help in the fight against the spread of HIV/AIDS by providing education and other interventions. They also promote changes in attitudes and behaviours and empower persons to respond positively to the challenges. Some of their services include Home Based Care, where they make home visits, with nurses, to infected persons and to counsel family members/care providers on health issues. They have support services; persons living with or affected by the virus are given support to help them combat the physical, emotional, and psychological challenges. "Life's Work" is an income generating programme which provides employment and therapy. They also offer free and confidential HIV testing, handled by trained, responsible counselors.

There are other institutions across the island to which infected persons can turn. Health Departments in Kingston, St. James, Trelawny, St. Ann and St. Mary readily welcome anyone who looks for medical and psychological help. The Jamaica Red Cross is very instrumental in assisting persons desperate for help. They carry out Casualty and Clinic/Hospital Services, home based care for people living with AIDS and HIV/AIDS Advocacy - Prevention and Support. If you are looking for help in the comfort of your own home (a part from the JAS), you can pick up the phone and call the AIDS/HIV Helpline toll-free (1-888-991-4444). There are a number of websites to

visit. These include: [www.nacjamaica.com](http://www.nacjamaica.com) and [www.jamaicaaidsupport.com](http://www.jamaicaaidsupport.com). These websites give very important information on many topics relating to HIV/AIDS, including where to go for help and tips on nutrition. There is tremendous help for mothers who are HIV positive. They would need the help, because they can't breast-feed due to the possibility of spreading the virus to the child. They can go to any certified clinic and get formula for the baby. These formulas are provided by the government.

## MYTHS ABOUT HIV/AIDS

Contrary to popular belief, HIV/AIDS cannot be spread by: shaking hands, sweat or tears, toilet seats, mosquitoes, working with or being around someone with HIV, simple (closed mouth) kissing, hugging, coughs or sneezes or eating food prepared or handled by an HIV-infected person.

No matter what you've heard, HIV/AIDS has not gone away. You cannot tell who is infected by how they look or by their lifestyle. They may look fine and healthy, but they can still pass the virus to you.

Twenty years after the first clinical evidence of acquired immunodeficiency syndrome was reported, AIDS has become the most devastating disease humankind has ever faced. Worldwide, it is the fourth biggest killer.



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