PRODUCT: Booklet on HIV/AIDS FAQs

HIV/AIDS
Frequently Asked Questions on HIV/AIDS

1. What is AIDS?

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a collection of diseases resulting from infections and cancers that are generally quite severe. The affected individual shows serious symptoms of at least one of these illnesses. It is caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV).

2. WHAT IS HIV? [insert picture of virus]

HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system. The body's defense is slowly damaged and destroyed resulting in a condition of immune deficiency. HIV is much more dangerous than other viruses, because it directly attacks and takes control over the blood cells needed by the immune system to fight infectious diseases. The virus also changes very rapidly and is easily able to evade many of the body's defense systems. There are two types of HIV; they are HIV-1 and HIV-2 and they have many subtypes. The most common form of the virus found in India is HIV-1, subtype C.

Blurbs for FAQ 1&2

WHAT IS A VIRUS?

A virus is a tiny microbe that can cause disease. It cannot be seen with the naked eye. To be able to live and reproduce, the virus needs to infect other living cells, either plant or animal. In the process of infection, the virus takes over the cell machinery of the plant or animal and uses it to produce new viruses. HIV mainly destroys white blood cells called CD4 or T-helper cells.

WHAT IS THE IMMUNE SYSTEM?[insert picture]

All of us have many mechanisms that work in our bodies to fight off infection and disease. All these mechanisms are collectively known as the ‘immune system’. When the immune system is able to fight an infection and keep the disease at bay, we say that person is “immune” to the disease. This immunity usually results from a group of specialised blood cells and proteins. It has the ability to recognise the difference between what belongs to your body and what does not. It can learn to recognise dangerous invaders such as germs or viruses responsible for diseases. Fever, swollen glands and rashes, for example, may be the signs to indicate that the immune system is learning to recognise and fight a new invader.

The problem is that the immune system has only two ways to learn about invaders which may cause disease: we inherit some immunity when we are born; otherwise the body only learns to recognise an invader the first time it meets it. If the invading germ is strong enough, it may overcome the immune system in that first attack and the person may become infected. Vaccinations are a way of teaching the immune system to recognise invaders before they attack the body for the first time. This means that people who are vaccinated against a certain disease are sufficiently protected because the immune system is ready for the first attack.

3. What is HIV infection?

When HIV attacks the immune system, the body's defense is slowly damaged and destroyed resulting in a condition of immune deficiency. This is a very slow process and most people who live with HIV feel perfectly healthy and may not show any symptoms for many years This is also the reason why many people do not even know that they are HIV-positive.

Over the years. the body becomes vulnerable to illnesses that a normal immune system would otherwise be able to defend against. These conditions, like pneumonia or tuberculosis (TB) in an HIV-positive person, are technically called opportunistic infections (OIs) simply because they attack the body taking the opportunity of a weakened immune system..If untreated, the disease typically progresses slowly from infection without symptoms to the clinical stage of AIDS. In developing countries, there are chances that an individual may suffer from AIDS and succumb to the disease faster than he or she would in developed countries.

Once infected with HIV, a person can pass the virus on to others. For knowing whether a person is HIV infected, his / her blood sample is tested in the laboratory.

4. How is HIV transmitted?

HIV can be transmitted from an infected person to another person through blood, semen, vaginal secretions and breast milk in the following ways:

- By having unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal or oral sex) without a condom with someone who is HIV-infected
- By using or being injured by - with or without your knowledge - unsterilised cutting or piercing equipment, such as injection needles or blades, recently brought into contact with the blood of someone who is HIV-infected
- By the use of contaminated needles, syringes or other drug injecting equipment
- By an HIV-infected mother to her baby during pregnancy, delivery or while breastfeeding.
- By receiving blood transfusions, blood products or organ transplants from an HIV-infected individual and where the mandatory screening for HIV has not been done appropriately
- By tattooing and/or piercing with improperly sterilised equipment.

Blurb for FAQ 5

1. HIV is most commonly spread during unsafe sexual practices (sex with multiple/ unknown/ HIV infected/ casual partners without the use of condoms). HIV is more easily transmitted sexually from men to women than vice versa.

2. HIV is not spread through kissing, touching, hugging or shaking hands; sharing crockery and cutlery; coughing and sneezing; contact with toilet seats; insect or animal bites; sharing a bathing area with or eating food prepared by someone who is HIV-infected.

5. Why is the HIV/AIDS epidemic being given so much attention?

Today, world-wide estimates indicate that at least 600 people are infected with HIV every hour, which is why the AIDS epidemic is recognised as one of the most devastating diseases in human history. Since the first clinical report of AIDS in June 1981 in the United States of America, HIV has infected more than 60 million people all over the world in a little over 25 years and more than 25 million have died of AIDS. Approximately 39.5 million people were living with HIV at the end of 2006. More than 95 percent of all new infections are occurring in developing countries across the world, where the challenge of protecting people from HIV is much greater than what it is in the developed world.

- AIDS is the world's fourth largest cause of death in humans. Although, treatment with anti-HIV medication can slow down disease progression and help HIV-infected people live a relatively healthy life, these do not cure HIV/AIDS.
- AIDS primarily affects people in the most productive age group (18-49 years), severely affecting the socio-economic structure of whole families, communities and countries
- HIV infection has spread rapidly. Before this, it was perhaps during the plague and smallpox epidemics in India during the early twentieth century that there was such an alarming spread of any serious infection
- AIDS is a complex condition to handle. Unlike other diseases like malaria or TB, a person with AIDS has to battle a range of co-infections that are very difficult to manage
- AIDS still means a great deal of stigma and discrimination. People living with HIV/AIDS are often treated unfairly and unjustly because of misconceptions within the community, much more than those with other infectious diseases.

BLURB for FAQ 6

In India, HIV infection was first reported in Chennai in 1986. In June 2007, it was officially announced that approximately 2-3.1 million people were living with HIV. It has spread to all the states in India; high-prevalence rates of the infection (more than one percent infection in pregnant women) have been reported from Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur and Nagaland.

Blurb for FAQ 4
Everybody has a right to information about HIV/AIDS – ask for it.

6. What are the current treatment options for HIV/AIDS?

While there is no cure for HIV/AIDS, there are medicines that can prevent and control various infections in people affected by HIV/AIDS. See FAQ 4. Today, people living with HIV are receiving treatment including several types of anti-HIV drugs, commonly known as antiretroviral drugs (ARVs). These drugs can check the speed with which HIV multiplies in the body. But ARVs are meant to be taken life-long, on a daily basis, following a rigid schedule. If patients miss even one dose in 50, the virus can become resistant to the medicines and they lose their effect. Even in patients who remember to take every dose, the medicines may stop working after some time. In addition, these drugs are very expensive and some of them are known to cause severe side effects. However, a strict treatment regimen and proper care and treatment have been shown to prolong survival and improve the quality of life of people living with HIV/AIDS. Babies born to HIV-infected mothers can be protected against HIV infection if the mother and baby receive ARVs during pregnancy and at delivery.

Blurb for FAQ 4
ARVs do not offer a complete cure.

Facilities for required laboratory HIV testing and ARVs are available at specified Government hospitals where eligible patients can get treatment free of cost.

5. Is there a vaccine for the prevention of HIV/AIDS?

Currently there is no effective vaccine to prevent HIV/AIDS. Many scientists from across the world agree that an AIDS vaccine is possible. Several vaccine candidates are currently being tested in clinical trials. These trials are conducted over long periods of time among different populations to ensure that a vaccine is safe, stimulates the body to produce the required immune response and is effective. In the last few years, AIDS vaccine research has gathered momentum and is today a global effort. Since the world

urgently needs an AIDS vaccine, several types of AIDS vaccines are being tried at the same time to help scientists, institutions and governments cut short the time that the search will take. India has put the search for an AIDS vaccine on mission status. The government has identified it as one of the most important scientific challenges facing the nation.

Blurb for FAQ 5…..
A preventive vaccine, if found, will not be a treatment for those who are already infected with HIV.

Scientists and doctors are working as fast as they can to develop a vaccine but, even if they succeed, a vaccine will probably not be 100 percent effective. We know that people remain protected from HIV infection by relying on classical methods of prevention such as the practice of safe sex, use of condoms and clean needles.
The response to prevent HIV/AIDS must be comprehensive and should include the classical methods and new technologies, once they are available.

These preventive measures would continue to be a significant part of the comprehensive response to prevent HIV/AIDS along with the vaccine.

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Logo:

NACO, ICMR, NARI, TRC, IAVI
Let us work together towards an AIDS vaccine