WHY WOMEN SHOULD BE INFORMED ABOUT HIV/AIDS ?

It is very important for every woman to be informed about HIV/AIDS. It means you can make decision about you and your children's health. You may want to help your partner and friends. The more people know about the facts of HIV/AIDS and how it spreads, the more they are likely to protect themselves and their partners from the virus. Also people will understand that a negative attitude towards person with HIV/AIDS is unwarranted.

WOMEN MAY BE AT GREATER RISK

Taking other risk factors into consideration, a woman has greater risk of getting HIV infection/AIDS as compared to a man. Important reasons for this are;

1)The reproductive organ of a woman is larger and the birth passage has more membrane lining as compared to man's reproductive organ making it is easier for HIV to enter into the body and cause immune deficiency.

2) Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD) in a woman is more likely to have no symptoms or go unnoticed as they are inside the body and not visible. Because of these reasons, a woman may not seek treatment for a STD. STDs can cause a break in the skin surface of the reproductive organ making it easier for HIV to enter into the body. One's risk of getting HIV infection/AIDS increases greatly if one has a STD.

3) Since women give birth and have monthly menstrual period, the chances for blood loss is greater and so too is the need of blood transfusions. Blood transfusion is risky if the blood used for transfusion is not tested for HIV.

WHAT IS THE CAUSE OF HIV INFECTION/ AIDS?

HIV infection/AIDS is caused by a virus called Human Immuno Deficiency Virus (HIV). In a healthy individual, infections and cancers are kept away by a variety of defenders in the body, constituting the immune function. HIV damages the immune system and eventually the body unable to fight off various infections.

When HIV enters a person's body, it multiplies and destroys mainly certain types of blood cells called CD4 lymphocyte that are responsible for immune functions. When the number of these CD4 lymphocytes decreases low enough, the body loses the capacity to fight against disease-causing agents and the person progresses to AIDS. The duration for the person to reach the stage of AIDS is long (6-10 years) meaning that even though many people have HIV in the body, they remain healthy for many years. When a person has HIV in the body and is yet to progress to AIDS, he/she is said to have HIV infection.

Only a blood test can determine whether the person has HIV infection or not. When the person reaches the stage of AIDS, he/she becomes susceptible to various diseases (infections like TB, Pneumonia, certain Cancers etc) as very low immunity of the person makes it difficult to fight against certain disease causing agents. Many of these diseases can be treated with medicines and can be cured. However, since the person's immunity is very low, he/she is at a risk of getting sick again from the same or another disease. AIDS is ultimately fatal.

HOW HIV SPREADS?

1. Sexual intercourse (penetrative sex like rectal, vaginal or oral sex) with a person infected with HIV. Rectal sex is more risky than vaginal sex and vaginal sex is more risky than oral sex.

2. Penetration of HIV into skin through any means, such as needle prick injury which is more with health workers, transfusions of blood infected with HIV, reuse of instruments that are not sterilized or not properly sterilized. Needles/syringes and other instruments used in health centers/clinics/hospitals can transmit HIV if they are contaminated with HIV. So do any other instruments that pierce the skin with procedure like acupuncture, ear-piercing etc. Actions that can lead to contact with blood or body fluid of another person e.g. sharing razor blades/tooth brushes may also transmit HIV. Among drug users, HIV may be passed on through sharing of needles and syringes, filters, spoons, rinsing water or any other equipment that may be contaminated with blood.
3. By an HIV infected mother to her child when in the womb, during birth or during breast-feeding.

HIV IS NOT SPREAD THROUGH:

HIV is not spread through the air, food or water. It is not transmitted through any social contact such as hugging, superficial kissing, shaking hands, sharing household items, toilet, pets, or by working with or going to school with someone who is infected with HIV. The virus does not enter through unbroken skin.

TREATMENT AND EFFECTS

Once a person starts taking antiretroviral treatment, they have to take it exactly as prescribed, and for the rest of their life. If not, they significantly increase the risk of drug resistance. In addition, antiretroviral drugs often have unpleasant side effects and the long-term effects of taking the drugs are still unknown. It is for these reasons that treatment is currently only recommended when HIV has attacked the immune system to an extend where, without treatment, the person's health will start to deteriorate. For many people living with HIV this means not starting treatment for years.

THE SYMPTOMS OF HIV/AIDS IN WOMEN?

While it's possible that a woman infected with HIV – the virus that causes AIDS, could display no symptoms, it's more typical that women infected with HIV will experience some subtle signs and symptoms experienced by women after exposure to HIV are;

1. Frequent or severe vaginal infections.
2. Abnormal Pap smears
3. Pelvic infections such as PID that are difficult to treat.

Other signs and symptoms of HIV infection include;

1. Recurrent vaginal yeast infections
2. Pelvic inflammatory disease or PID
3. Pap smears that indicate abnormal changes or dysplasia
4. Genital ulcers
5. Genital warts
6. Severe mucosal herpes infections

Frequently, women exposed to HIV experience flu-like symptoms within a couple of weeks of becoming infected. In other cases, there are no symptoms for many years. As the infection progresses, it is not uncommon to exprience symptoms such as:

1. Swollen lymph glands in the neck, underarm area, or groin
2. Frequent fevers that include night sweats
3. Rapid weight loss without dieting

4. Constant fatigue
5. Decreased appetite and diarrhea
6. White spots or abnormal blemishes in the mouth

DO NOT SHARE NEEDLES/SYRINGES DURING DRUG USE

Among drug users, HIV may also be passed-on through sharing needle and syringes, filter, spoon, rinsing water or any equipment that may be contaminated with blood. Apart from HIV and complications related to use of drugs and needles, the drug users are at risk of getting many other disease (Hepatitis B, C and others and their complications.) There is also the social and financial cost of maintaining the habit. So it is best to come clean of this habit. You or your friend may need help to become clean. For further details and help, contact the agencies that work for drug users or the health center in your area for guidance.

BODY PIERCING

Whenever your body is pierced by a needle or syringe in a clinic, ear piercing, tatooing, accupunture or any other procedures, make sure that the instrument is properly sterelised. Single use instruments that are disposable are better. Blood used for transfusion must be tested for HIV and only HIV negative blood must be used.

HIV/AIDS AND PREGENANCY

If the mother has HIV/AIDS, HIV can be transmitted to the child through birth canal during delivery, or before birth while the mother is pregnant. An estimated 20 – 50% of the babies born to HIV positive mothers are infected and this risk can be reduced by taking anti-HIV medicines. The medicines are costly and they may produce side effects.
HIV positive mothers can transmit HIV to the children during breast-feeding.The risk of infection from breast feeding for up to six months is that one in every 20 babies is likely to become infected with HIV. Current available data suggest that 14% of children who are breast-fed by a mother who was infected before delivery and 29% of children who was breast-fed by a mother who was infected after delivery will become HIV infected through breast-feeding.However, breast feeding in general has great advantages for the child one of them is minimizing diarrhoea, a leading cause of death in children from protective immunity of the breast milk and the resultant avoidance of bottle-feeding. One can contact a doctor or an HIV counselor for further details.

WORKING WITH OR CARING FOR SOMEONE WITH HIV/AIDS

This generally carries no risk, as long as blood or secretions from a wound do not come in contact with any broken skin that you may have, there is no risk. Contact a staff from a Health Center on simple precautions that have to be taken against blood and other secretions. A home is a very important place for a person with HIV/AIDS. If a person with HIV/AIDS is assured of love and care , he/she will cope better emotionally and physically. A person with HIV?AIDS needs your love and understanding more than ever.
Show that you are a person who can be trusted.
Provide physical care to him/her
Be ready to listen and talk. Give them an opportunity to talk and share.
Take him/her out once in a while or as often as he/she wants.
Find out about his/her needs and wants and be patient.
Give him/her a hug or hold his/her hands if you get an opportunity.

TEXT COURTESY - DR. LOBSANG TSERING
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH DHARAMSALA

REMEMBER THAT HIV/AIDS CAN HAPPEN TO ANYBODY. ALWAYS CONSULT A DOCTOR FOR ADVICE AND TREATMENT

WOMEN AND HIV/AIDS

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GAWEYLON
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POST BOX NO. 286
DEHRADUN GPO - 248001
UTTARAKHAND
INDIA
E-MAIL gaweylon@gmail.com
WEBSITE- www.gaweylon.com
YOU CAN CALL OR SMS US AT
+91 7417065068