



AIDS MYTHS AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY AIDS MYTHS?

When AIDS first became known, it was a very mysterious disease. It caused the death of many people. There are still many unanswered questions about the disease. Many people reacted with fear and came up with stories to back up their fear. Most of these had to do with how easy it was to become infected with HIV. Most of these are not true.

TRANSMISSION MYTHS

Many people believed that HIV and AIDS could be transmitted by a mosquito bite, by sharing a drinking glass with someone with AIDS, by being around someone with AIDS who was coughing, by hugging or kissing someone with AIDS, and so on. See fact sheet 150 for current information on how HIV is transmitted. Transmission can only occur if someone is exposed to blood, semen, vaginal fluid or mother's milk (see fact sheet 611) from an infected person. There is no documentation of transmission from the tears or saliva of an infected person.

• **Myth:** A woman with HIV infection can't have children without infecting them.

• **Reality:** Without any treatment, HIV-infected mothers pass HIV to their newborns about 25% of the time. However, with modern treatments, this rate has dropped to only about 2%. See Fact Sheet 611 for more information about HIV and pregnancy.

• **Myth:** HIV is being spread by needles left in theater seats or vending machine coin returns.

• **Reality:** There is no documented case of this type of transmission.

MYTHS ABOUT A CURE

It can be very scary to have HIV infection or AIDS. The course of the disease is not very predictable. Some people get very sick in just a few months. Others live healthy lives for 20 years or more. The treatments can be difficult to take, with serious side effects. Not everyone can afford the medications. It's not surprising that scam artists have come up with several "cures" for AIDS that involve a variety of substances. Unfortunately, none of these "cures" work. See fact sheet 206 for more information on frauds related to AIDS.

A very unfortunate myth in some parts of the world is that having sex with a virgin will cure AIDS. As a result, many young girls have been exposed to HIV and have developed AIDS. There is no evidence to support this belief.

• **Myth:** Current medications can cure AIDS. It's no big deal if you get infected.

• **Reality:** today's medications have cut the death rate from AIDS by about 80%. They are also easier to take than they used to be. However, they still have side effects, are very expensive, and have to be taken every day for the rest of your life. If you miss too many doses, HIV can develop resistance (see fact sheet 126) to the drugs you are taking and they'll stop working.

AIDS IS A DEATH SENTENCE

In the 1980s, there was a very high death rate from AIDS. However, medications have improved dramatically and so has the life span of people with HIV infection. If you have access to ARVs and to medical monitoring, there's no reason you can't live a long life even with HIV infection or AIDS.

THE GOVERNMENT DEVELOPED AIDS TO REDUCE MINORITY POPULATIONS

The world's best researchers in government and in private pharmaceutical companies are working hard to try to stop AIDS. The government doesn't have the capability to create a virus.

Many minorities do not trust the government, especially regarding health care. A recent study in Texas found that as many as 30% of Latinos and African Americans believed that HIV is a government conspiracy to kill minorities. However, it seems that minorities receive a lower level of health care due to the same factors as anyone else: low income, inconvenient health care offices, and so on. Attitudes about health care and health care providers were much less important.

MYTHS ABOUT MEDICATIONS

It has been very challenging for doctors to choose the best anti-HIV medications (ARVs) for their patients. When the first drugs were developed, they had to be taken as many as three times a day. Some drugs had complicated requirements about storage, or what kind of food they had to be

taken with (or how long you had to wait after eating before taking a dose.) The reality of ARVs has changed dramatically. However, there are still some myths:

• **Myth:** You have to take your doses exactly 12 (or 8, or 24) hours apart.

• **Reality:** Medications today are fairly forgiving. Although you will have the most consistent blood levels of your drugs if they are taken at even intervals through the day, they won't stop working if you're off by an hour or two. However, people taking Crixivan® (indinavir) without ritonavir need to be very careful about timing.

• **Myth:** You have to take 100% of your doses on time or else they'll stop working.

• **Reality:** It's very important to take AIDS medications correctly. In fact, if you miss more than about 5% of your doses, HIV has an easier time developing resistance (see fact sheet 126) and possibly being able to multiply even when you're taking ARVs. However, 100% adherence is not realistic for just about anyone. Do the best you can and be sure to let your health care provider what's going on.

• **Myth:** Current drugs are so strong that you can stop taking them (take a drug holiday) with no problem.

• **Reality:** Ever since the first AIDS drugs were developed, patients have wanted to stop taking them due to side effects or just being reminded that they had AIDS. There have been many studies of "treatment interruptions" and all of them have shown that stopping your ARVs is very likely to cause problems. You could give the virus a chance to multiply (see fact sheet 125 on the viral load) or your count of CD4 cells (see fact sheet 124) could drop, a sign of immune damage.

• **Myth:** AIDS drugs are poison and are more dangerous than the HIV virus.

Reality: When the first AIDS drugs became available, they weren't as good as current medications. People still died of AIDS-related conditions. It's true that some people get serious side effects from AIDS medications, but the death rate in the US has dropped by about 80%. Researchers are working hard to make HIV treatments easier and safer to use.

Reviewed April 14, 2008