

# HIV Trends and Women's Sexual Health

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A summary of articles with a women-centred focus on HIV, sexually transmitted infections, prevention issues and more. Please contact the source cited or Positive Women's Network if you'd like more information.

edited by Janet Madsen, Communications Coordinator (janetm@pwn.bc.ca)

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## Prevention Issues and Challenges

### Risk of HIV Infection Increases During Pregnancy

"Increase risk of incident HIV during pregnancy in Rakai, Uganda: a prospective study," Lancet: Ronald Gray of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and colleagues compared HIV incidence rates among sexually active pregnant and lactating women in Uganda to incidence among sexually active nonpregnant and nonlactating women. The researchers found that the risk of HIV infection during pregnancy increases.

Hormonal changes affecting the genital tract or immune system, not changes in sexual behavior, likely are the cause of the increased risk, according to researchers. The researchers recommend targeted HIV prevention for pregnant women

Source: Kaiser Daily AIDS Summaries Oct 03, 2005  
Original source: Gray et al., Lancet, 10/1.

### Male Circumcision Might Reduce Risk of Female-to-Male HIV Transmission

Male circumcision can reduce by about 65% the risk of men contracting HIV through sexual intercourse with women, according to a study conducted by French and South African researchers and presented Tuesday at the 3rd International AIDS Society Conference on HIV Pathogenesis and Treatment in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, BBC News reports (BBC News, 7/26). The randomized, controlled clinical trial enrolled more than 3,000 HIV-negative, uncircumcised men ages 18 to 24 living in a South African township (AFP/Yahoo! News, 7/26). Half of the men were randomly assigned to be circumcised, and the other half served as a control group, remaining uncircumcised (Reuters Health, 7/26). Bertrand Auvert, who coordinated the study for France's National AIDS Research Agency, said that after 21 months, 51 of the uncircumcised men had contracted HIV, compared with 18 of the circum-

cised men. The procedure "prevented six to seven out of 10 potential HIV infections," Auvert said (Astor, AP/Long Island Newsday, 7/27). He added that because the men in the study identified themselves as heterosexual, the results cannot be generalized to male-to-male or male-to-female transmission (Reuters Health, 7/26).

#### Reaction

Although UNAIDS expressed "considerable interest" in the study, the agency emphasized that more research is required to determine the true effectiveness of circumcision in preventing female-to-male HIV transmission. The results of two NIH-funded studies under way in Kenya and Uganda could shed more light on male circumcision in different social and cultural environments. If circumcision proves to be an effective tool to help curb

## Prevention Issues and Challenges

### Male Circumcision (continued)

the spread of HIV, the procedure still will need to be part of a comprehensive prevention package. "Although UNAIDS believes that it is premature to recommend male circumcision services as part of HIV prevention programs, there is heightened interest from governments and the general public in male circumcision in a number of African countries," the agency said in a release (UNAIDS release, 7/26). "While these results are very promising, we need to put them in a broader context to see the full benefits of circumcision," Charles Gilks, head of treatment, prevention and scale up at the World Health Organization HIV/AIDS Programme, said. Gilks said he worries that the study could make

many circumcised men believe they cannot contract HIV and lead them to engage in sex without a condom. In addition, he said WHO is rushing to set guidelines for safe and hygienic circumcision, as many men might seek to undergo the procedure after hearing of the study results. Gilks also said he is concerned that traditional healers might try to perform circumcisions without the proper training and without educating men about HIV/AIDS prevention methods (AP/Long Island Newsday, 7/27).

Source: Kaiser Network Daily HIV/AIDS Report July 27, 2005

### Recent Cash Pledges Bring Microbicides Closer to Development

The development of microbicides — which include a range of products, such as gels, films and sponges, that could help prevent the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases — has gained more "credibility" with recent promises of research funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and a pledge by leaders of the Group of Eight industrialized nations to purchase microbicides once they become available, the New York Daily News reports.

Microbicides protect women from HIV by "immobilizing" the virus or boosting their immune systems to fight the virus (Lite, New York Daily News, 7/28). Although HIV is transmitted primarily through heterosexual intercourse in much of Africa

and Asia, no female-controlled HIV prevention method is widely available (Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report, 5/24). Microbicides could save an estimated 2.5 million lives worldwide over a three-year period, according to a report commissioned by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Researchers are working on 14 experimental microbicides, and five are undergoing human testing to determine their efficacy. An effective microbicide could be available within three to four years, according to UNAIDS.

The Gates Foundation has committed more than \$88.5 million in grants to microbicide development, and the Senate earlier this month approved a \$31.8 billion fiscal year 2006 foreign aid appropria-

## Prevention Issues and Challenges

### Microbicides (continued)

tions bill (HR 3057) that would increase funding earmarked for microbicides to \$42 million. However, NIH dedicates only 2% — or \$69 million — of its HIV/AIDS budget to microbicide research, compared with \$607 million spent on research for an HIV/AIDS vaccine. Some advocates say NIH needs a special department dedicated to microbicide research. Lori Heise, director of the Global Cam-

paign for Microbicides, said women must lobby government and industry to develop a safe and effective microbicide, using a grassroots approach similar to those that have been effective in promoting breast cancer research and domestic violence awareness campaigns (New York Daily News, 7/28).

Source: KaiserNetwork.org Daily HIV/AIDS Report, July 29, 2005

## Women's Health Spectrum

### Heterosexual Females May Not Know They Are HIV-Positive Until They Nearly Die

A recent report by Health Canada's Center for Infectious Disease Prevention and Control found that heterosexual women are surpassing gay men in newly acquired HIV infections. By 2002 - the most recent year for which statistics are available - the proportion of HIV-infected females rose to 25.4 percent of reported cases from 12 percent in 1997.

Brian Warrington, executive director of the AIDS Committee of Guelph and Wellington, believes the number of infected women could be higher. "Women are not getting tested," said Warrington. "Physicians don't think of testing women for HIV. It doesn't cross their minds they should be tested."

Women in established marriages can become infected by unfaithful husbands; wives who cheat can become infected by their lovers; and divorced women who are new to the dating scene need to take precautions as well. "It's really important for everyone to protect their own health," said Warrington.

Maggie Derkzen, 59, did not know she was HIV-positive until after she collapsed at home and was rushed to the emergency room at Guelph General Hospital. Diagnosed with pneumocystis pneumonia, toxoplasmosis encephalitis, and a fungal infection in her lungs, Derkzen had fully developed AIDS. After two weeks of treatments including antiretrovirals, Derkzen finally turned the corner. "Within a month she was standing and the twinkle was back in her eye," said her physician, Guelph HIV specialist Dr. Anne-Marie Zajdlik.

According to Zajdlik, Derkzen is part of a growing reality of HIV infections in Canada. "She represents the new face of HIV- females who don't know they are HIV-positive until they nearly die."

Source: CDC HIV/STD/TB Prevention News Update 08/09/2005  
Original Source: Guelph Mercury (07.26.05): Joanne Shuttleworth

## Women's Health Spectrum

### Girls Abused by Dates at Higher STD Risk

Girls in grades 9-12 who have been subjected to physical or sexual violence by a date are more likely to report STD testing and diagnoses than their non-abused peers, according to an analysis of 1,621 sexually active girls involved in the 1999 and 2001 Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Surveys.

About one-third of the girls surveyed had ever been tested for an STD, and 5 percent had been diagnosed with one, study author Michele R. Decker, of Harvard's School of Public Health, and colleagues found. Almost one of every three girls had ever been sexually or physically abused by a date. Nearly 40 percent of girls who had been tested for an STD reported dating violence, and more than half of those who had been diagnosed with an STD or HIV reported such abuse. Girls who experienced both sexual and physical violence were 2.4 times more likely to test for an STD, three times more likely to have tested for an STD and HIV, and 2.6 times more likely to be diagnosed with an STD.

Overall, "among dating violence victims we see that 1 in 12 girls report a sexually transmitted disease, compared with 1 in 30 for non-victimized girls," said Decker.

"Often in a violent relationship the abuse will carry over to sexual experiences," said Decker, explaining the correlation. "That is to say that these girls are often in coercive or forced sexual situations with their dating partners and are unable to request condoms or ensure that condoms are used." Additionally, abusive men often have "multiple sexual partners outside of the relationship and are not necessarily using STD protection," she said.

Decker said health services for abuse survivors are "crucial," and she recommended expanding sex education "to consider the role of sexual coercion and violence." "To truly prevent dating violence and its damaging health impacts, we must promote healthy and respectful relationships among teens and hold abusers accountable for their actions."

The full report, "Dating Violence and Sexually Transmitted Disease/HIV Testing and Diagnosis Among Adolescent Females," was published in the journal *Pediatrics* (2005;116(2):e272-e276).

Source: CDC HIV/STD/TB Prevention News Update 08/04/2005  
Original Source: Reuters Health(08.01.05): Charnicia E. Huggins

## Women's Health Spectrum

### Vaccine Prevents Most Cervical Cancer

Yesterday, researchers reported that a two-year study of Merck & Co.'s experimental vaccine Gardasil found that it was highly effective at preventing cervical cancer, nearly every case of which is caused by the common STD human papillomavirus (HPV).

More than 30 types of HPV infect the human genital area. Some types cause genital warts, while others cause cancer. HPV is often harmless in most people because their immune systems fight it off. But the virus persists in some women, causing abnormal growths on the cervix, some of which turn cancerous. Gardasil targets HPV types 16 and 18, which together cause 70 percent of cervical cancers; other types cause the rest. It also protects against the two types responsible for 90 percent of cases of genital warts, 6 and 11.

At an infectious disease conference today in San Francisco, Merck researchers are expected to present results of the study, which involved more than 12,000 women, ages 16-26, from 13 countries. Half received Gardasil and half placebos. Among the women who received all three doses of Gardasil and were not infected with HPV at the

study's start, researchers found no precancerous cells or early-stage cervical cancer associated with types 16 or 18. Among those who received the placebos, there were 21 cases. However, some in the vaccinated group did develop precancerous cells associated with other HPV types; Merck did not disclose how many.

Dr. Eliav Barr, a research director at Merck, said the ideal time to vaccinate girls is before they become sexually active and risk being exposed to a cancer-causing HPV type. The vaccination will require three shots over six months. It is not clear how long Gardasil will provide protection, how much it will cost, or whether booster shots will be necessary, said Barr.

Although Merck will seek Food and Drug Administration approval to vaccinate girls and women later this year, the company plans eventually to seek approval to use Gardasil in boys and men. Merck has not disclosed any data on whether Gardasil works in men.

Source: CDC HIV/STD/TB Prevention News Update 10/07/2005  
Original Source: New York Times (10.07.05): Denise Grady

## Women's Health Spectrum

### Sexual Abuse History, Risk Behavior, and Sexually Transmitted Diseases: The Impact of Age at Abuse

Researchers used bivariate analysis to test association among age at onset of sexual abuse, risk behaviors, and STD diagnosis (n=2,175) in an STD clinic-attending adolescent population. Relationship between sexual abuse and STD acquisition was assessed by regression analysis.

The investigators found that more females than males reported sexual abuse, at 26.75 percent and 5.4 percent respectively. Abuse at or before 10 years of age was associated with more lifetime and recent partners. The researchers found

a history of abuse to be associated with higher rates of STD tests. In regression analysis, for males and females, the odds of having an STD were 2.5 times greater if abuse occurred at 10 years or younger.

"Sexual abuse at a younger age is associated with more sexual risk behaviors and is a risk factor for STDs," the authors concluded.

Source: CDC HIV/STD/TB Prevention News Update 08/01/2005  
Original Source: Sexually Transmitted Diseases Vol. 32; No. 6: P. 358-363 (06..05); Sally-Ann Ohene, et al.

### Chlamydia: The Most Common STD You've Never Heard Of

Infecting some 3 million patients each year, chlamydia is the most commonly reported bacterial STD in the United States. Though it can easily be cured with antibiotics, chlamydia often goes undetected because many people do not have symptoms of the infection.

Dr. Marilyn A. Maxwell, professor of internal medicine and pediatrics at St. Louis University, said awareness of chlamydia varies. "More and more people, particularly young people in their sex-education classes, are learning about it, but it is surprising how many people aren't familiar with chlamydia," said Maxwell. "You may have it, you may pass it on and not know that you have it."

Young people are especially vulnerable, say experts. In the first nationally representative study of chlamydia prevalence, CDC researchers found that nearly one in 20 women ages 14-19 were

infected with the disease. Among men, 20- to 29-year-olds were most affected, CDC found. But the incidence of chlamydia drops off dramatically after age 30, said Dr. Stanely Gall, a University of Louisville professor who specializes in women's health, gynecology and obstetrics. If a sexually active woman under 25 has not had an annual screening, she should ask to have it done, he said.

Teenage girls are at increased risk for chlamydia and other STDs "just because of the way they're made," explained Maxwell. "The cervix has a lining of cells that changes position as they get older, so a 15-year-old or a 16-year-old exposed to chlamydia is much more likely to get it than a 26- or 36- or 46-year-old woman," she said.

Source: CDC HIV/STD/TB Prevention News Update 09/08/2005  
Original Source: Courier-Journal (Louisville, Ky.), 09.01.05: Darla Carter

## Testing, Treatment and Care

### Anti-Convulsant Might Help Eliminate Dormant HIV-Infected Cells

The anti-convulsant drug valproic acid, when used in combination with highly active antiretroviral treatment, has shown promise in reducing the number of dormant cells infected with HIV, a finding that one day could lead to a cure for HIV/AIDS, according to preliminary research published in the Aug. 12 issue of the *Lancet*, the AP/USA Today reports. Currently available antiretroviral drugs work only when HIV is multiplying, which happens only when it is in an active cell. However, HIV also infects dormant cells, making the virus itself temporarily dormant and undetectable by antiretrovirals. Therefore, an HIV-positive person cannot be cured until all of the HIV-infected dormant cells can be identified and eradicated.

In a proof of concept study, David Margolis of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and colleagues gave four HIV-positive patients valproic acid — which is used to treat such conditions as bipolar disorder and epilepsy — twice a day for three months. The patients continued taking combination antiretroviral therapy. The researchers found that latent HIV infection reduced by 75% in three of the patients. Margolis said he believes the drug reactivates HIV in the dormant cell (AP/USA Today, 8/11).

#### Reaction

"This finding, though not definitive, suggests that new approaches will allow the cure of HIV in the future," Margolis said (Clabby, Raleigh News & Observer, 8/12). Jean Pierre Routy of McGill University in Montreal said in an accompanying commentary to the *Lancet* study that the findings "merit

urgent further study." Also, Chris Gadd of British HIV/AIDS information source Aidsmap cautioned against scientists being "overconfident about the eventual introduction of this approach in HIV treatment," adding, "This study is the first small step towards a fuller investigation, which may well result in this approach falling by the wayside" (BBC News, 8/11).

Abraham Karpas of the University of Cambridge called the findings "absolute nonsense," adding that the scientists "don't understand the biology of the virus. We will cure every cancer before we find a cure for HIV. The only way to defeat this disease so far is to prevent infection" (Laurence, Independent, 8/12). Robert Sliciano of Johns Hopkins University also said he doubts that valproic acid will cure HIV because the virus probably lies dormant in other types of cells that scientists have not yet discovered. "It's a little bit premature to be talking about a cure for HIV," he said (AP/USA Today, 8/11).

Source: Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report - Friday, August 12, 2005  
<http://www.kaisernetwork.org>

## Testing, Treatment and Care

### Access and Utilization of HIV Treatment and Services Among Women Sex Workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

Despite the significant HIV treatment advance of highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART), many HIV-positive women are not realizing its benefits. While recent studies have identified female intravenous drug users (IDUs) and sex workers as at high risk of HIV infection, there have been few studies on their utilization of HIV treatment and services. In the current study, researchers evaluated the needs of women engaged in survival sex and their access, use, and acceptance of HAART.

During November 2003, a baseline needs assessment was conducted among 159 women attending a low-threshold drop-in center serving sex workers in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside, a highly marginalized population coping with multiple morbidities, unstable housing, and increased risk of drug use and STD infection. Researchers used cross-sectional data to describe the population's sociodemographic characteristics, drug use, HIV/hepatitis C testing and status, and attitudes about HAART.

Among those surveyed, reports of cocaine injection, heroin injection, and smokeable crack cocaine use were high. Preliminary findings suggested a high uptake of health and social services, but only 9 percent of the women reported HAART use. Barriers to treatment access were largely attributed to erroneous information and conceptions about treatment.

The study emphasized the potential to reach this marginalized population through community interventions and women-specific services, and it provided a valuable baseline of information on a group that is largely outside of HIV care.

Source: CDC HIV/STD/TB Prevention News Update 08/29/2005  
Original Source: Journal of Urban Health Vol. 82; No. 3: P. 488-497 (09..05):: Kate Shannon; Vicki Bright; Janice Duddy; Mark W. Tyndall

## Testing, Treatment and Care

### Maternal Mortality, AIDS Leading Causes of Death for Women Worldwide; Investment in Gender Equality Needed, UNFPA Report Says

More than 500,000 women died from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth in 2000, but 99% of those maternal deaths were preventable, according to the U.N. Population Fund's "State of World Population 2005" report released on Wednesday, BBC News reports (BBC News, 10/12). Reproductive health problems, including HIV/AIDS, are the leading cause of death among women ages 15 to 44 and are responsible for approximately 250 million years of productive life lost annually, the report says (Lawless, AP/ABC News, 10/12). Experts said that most maternal deaths are preventable through family planning that provides access to contraceptives, skilled workers attending to births and improved access to emergency obstetric care when necessary (BBC News, 10/12). An estimated 76 million unplanned pregnancies and 19 million unsafe abortions occur worldwide annually (UNFPA release, 10/12). About half of the approximately 40 million HIV-positive people worldwide are women, and prevalence is rising among women, especially young women, according to the report (Daily Mail, 10/12). Women ages 15 to 24 are 1.6 times as likely to be HIV-positive as their male counterparts, the reports says (BBC News, 10/12).

### Recommendations, Costs

The report says that improving gender equality and investing in the health and education of women and youth could lead to lower HIV prevalence rates, smaller families, and healthier, more literate children, Reuters reports. "It is time to call for action to free women from discrimination, violence

and poor health they face in their daily lives," UNFPA Executive Director Thoraya Obaid said, adding, "If we don't invest in women's education and health and their ability to plan their family, we are not allowing them to be able to contribute to the economic sector" (Reaney, Reuters, 10/12). The estimated cost of achieving the U.N. Millennium Development Goals — which include stemming the HIV/AIDS pandemic, halving extreme poverty, promoting gender equality and reducing maternal mortality — would be \$135 billion in 2006, rising to \$195 billion in 2015 (AP/ABC News, 10/12). Providing social infrastructure alone will not solve the problem, Steve Kraus, head of the HIV/AIDS branch of UNFPA, said, adding, "When we benefit women in a just and free society, all of society benefits. When we suppress women, society loses" (Cheong-won, Korea Times, 10/12).

Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report - Thursday, October 13, 2005