

5 things every TEEN should know about HIV

Teens often feel like nothing can hurt them. To many, their impression of HIV is that it only happens to certain people. In actuality, HIV does impact the Teenage population.

In Jamaica, adolescent girls aged 15-19 years are three times more likely to be infected with HIV. There are many misconceptions surrounding HIV and AIDS. Some of these are fuelled by fear, culture, socialisation, the media, and by ignorance. Let's take a look at the truth. Here are five key things every teen should know about HIV and AIDS.

- 1 - Oral sex is not as safe as you think Oral sex is often thought of as "safer sex". Many adolescents believe that oral sex is a safe way to engage in sex, free from the worry of pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. The truth is that oral sex is not as safe as you think. Studies have shown that infected bodily fluids such as semen and vaginal secretions have high concentrations of HIV that can enter the blood stream through the mucous membranes of the mouth. Oral sex can also spread various sexually-transmitted diseases. To make oral-vaginal sex and oral-anal sex safer, you can use a barrier such as a dental dam. Unfortunately, dental dams can be hard to find, and they also may be somewhat expensive.
- 2 - There's more to worry about than pregnancy Many Teens still believe that the only risk associated with unprotected sex is pregnancy. So, to prevent pregnancy, Teens use birth control techniques such as condoms, oral sex or the withdrawal method ('pulling out') prior to ejaculation, in an effort to prevent pregnancy. Unfortunately, there is more to be concerned about. Infection with an STI including HIV is for life, meaning there is no cure. Herpes, syphilis, genital warts and HIV are real concerns that if contracted will be with you a lifetime. STI's are very uncomfortable and are not 'cool', and some are life-threatening. Teens should seek urgent medical attention at the first sign of an STI or if you are unsure.
- 3 - HIV does not discriminate Since the first case of HIV was discovered in 1982 in Jamaica, many myths and stereotypes have been thrown around as to who and what people with the virus looks like. Some claimed only gays had it, or sex workers, and others claimed it was a white man's disease. Many Teens grow up with these images as the faces of AIDS. The fact is that anyone can get HIV, from the elderly men and women you see walking on the road or driving their spanking new Mercedes Benzes to Teenagers planning their next date or hanging in the plazas in Liguanea or Half-Way-Tree. Males and females, adults and youths, uptown and downtown, employed and unemployed, and students and high school teachers: HIV can infect anyone who doesn't take the proper precautions.
- 4 - Sometimes people hide the truth/Sometimes people don't know Think about it for a moment. How many of you would admit you are HIV-infected, if asked? How many of you will admit to your sexual history when trying to win the affections of a new love interest? How many of you really know your HIV status and the status of the people you have had sex with in the past? A claim of "my past partner was negative" is only acceptable if it is backed by a negative test. Ask the right questions and get the test. However, abstinence is always a greater option for teens, especially those of you in school. If you are already sexually active, don't worry, you can reclaim your virginity.
- 5 - There is no cure for HIV People infected with HIV in Jamaica are living longer due to the Government's free ARV policy. However, the medications are not a cure. Liver disease, pneumonia, and serious infections of the brain and other internal organs are constant concerns for those living with HIV. The medicines are not a "quick fix". They are difficult to take and cause many side effects. However, if you are infected with HIV, please talk to your doctor about the benefits of taking medication.