

1 December 2014 | Cairo, Egypt – This year the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region marks World AIDS Day under the slogan "HIV treatment controls the virus. Treat for Life. Prevent for Life". This is a call for action so that every individual living with HIV can enjoy the highest attainable level of health through lifelong access to good quality HIV care and treatment.

This is possible today. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) has become less toxic, easier to administer and easier to take. People living with HIV who take ART in the right combination of medicines can control the virus and bring it down to undetectable levels. This keeps the immune system strong enough to fight opportunistic infections and cancers. So people living with HIV can now live long, healthy and productive lives.

On the occasion of World AIDS Day 2014, Dr Ala Alwan, WHO Regional Director for the Eastern Mediterranean, explains that "HIV treatment reduces the virus to undetectable levels, and protects people against diseases. Secondary to the preventive benefit to individuals of reducing the virus to undetectable levels, there is a benefit to public health in general. Implementing ART programmes reduces the likelihood of transmission from people living with HIV to others. This is a major public health gain that will eventually result in curbing the HIV epidemic".

Dr Alwan adds that "Effective HIV treatment will help people living with HIV to avoid the transmission of their infection to their uninfected partners. Similarly, once the level of their infection has become undetectable, pregnant women living with HIV can give birth without passing the virus on to their babies".

This year, World AIDS Day marks the beginning of the third year since the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean launched the regional initiative to End the HIV Treatment Crisis.

Efforts to scale-up ART in countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region continue. The Region has witnessed a 46% increase in the number of people living with HIV receiving treatment, from 25 000 in 2012 to over 39 000 in 2013. Though commendable, ART coverage remains at below 25% of those in need.

In order to get the most benefit out from advances in HIV treatment, health systems need to be strong and they need to be able to ensure access to treatment for all those in need. Access to treatment starts with enabling people living with HIV to access testing services, receive a test and know the result. Then, we need to ensure that those who test positive are linked to good quality care and treatment.

"Health systems need to be adapted to ensure that even the least privileged and most marginalized individuals are not excluded", Dr Alwan said. "In order to assess the success of our treatment programmes, we also need to monitor the success of treatment in individuals. This is done through viral load testing. Unfortunately, in our Region, the necessary technology to do this is still lacking in more than half the countries. This means that we need to redouble our efforts and refocus our policies, programmes and services to ensure that no one is excluded from treatment".

For more information:

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