

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the HIV epidemic has been on the rise since 2001. Although the overall prevalence in the Region is still low, the rise in new infections has put the Region among the top two regions in the world with the fastest growing HIV epidemic. The rise in the estimated number of people living with HIV in the Region is presumably the result of an increased HIV prevalence among key populations at higher risk and an onwards transmission of the virus to a larger number of individuals who are generally at lower risk of infection. Recent modes of transmission studies in the Islamic Republic of Iran and Morocco and repeated rounds of surveys in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia have supported this assumption.

Annual estimated new infections among adults and children have substantially increased in the past decade. Approximately 560 000 people are living with HIV in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, among them 42 000 children aged 0–14 years. It is estimated that 82 000 adults and 7 400 children have been newly infected.

AIDS-related deaths have also almost doubled in the past decade among both adults and children in the Region, reaching a total of 38 000 in 2010 including 4100 children. The estimated increase of AIDS-related deaths among reflects three problems: 1) an accelerating epidemic in the Region; 2) a rise in the total number of women living with HIV (40% in 2010); and 3) the generally inadequate coverage of services to prevent mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

In contrast, globally new infections and deaths are decreasing due to the increased availability of antiretroviral therapy, and care and support to people living with HIV, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.

For the third year, the World AIDS Campaign focuses on human rights. The right to health is a core value in delivering health services. The regional theme for the World AIDS Campaign 2011 is “stigma and discrimination in health care settings”.

In choosing this regional theme, we focus this year on reducing stigma and discrimination in health care settings. Stigma and discrimination against people living with HIV and those at increased risk of HIV transmission still exist to varying degrees across the Region. They remain massive barriers to people accessing prevention and care services. They are also major impediments when it comes to encouraging stigmatized population groups to seek and access health services and adhere to health interventions.

Many countries have witnessed women in labour not being allowed to deliver in hospitals because of their HIV positive status. Men, women and children living with HIV in dire need of surgery have been denied this right. Even with non-invasive procedures, some health care workers have refused to care for people living with HIV. Public and institutional measures have enacted mandatory HIV testing on individuals upon their admission to health care services, often resulting in denial of access to those who test positive, unnecessary isolation or, at the least, gossip.

In the Eastern Mediterranean Region, the 2011 World AIDS Campaign has prompted discussions among health care providers in the Region about injustices that remain and about improved conditions to work towards. The campaign asserts that upholding shared human rights is the best way to bring about HIV prevention, treatment and care for all. As enshrined in the WHO Constitution, access to the highest attainable level of health is a human rights imperative. The rights-based approach reinforces the principles that individuals should not be tested for HIV against their will or denied equal health services because of their HIV status.

While health care providers have the responsibility to comply with standard precautions and equal treatment of all patients, decision-makers in health also have the responsibility to make prevention supplies and post-exposure prophylaxis medicines available to health care workers. Regardless of an individual's role in the health care system and the agencies that support it, everyone has the power to Take the Lead to Stop AIDS.

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