



Laboratory workers conduct blood testing in Hargeisa, Somaliland. Photo credit: WHO Somalia/Fouzia Bano

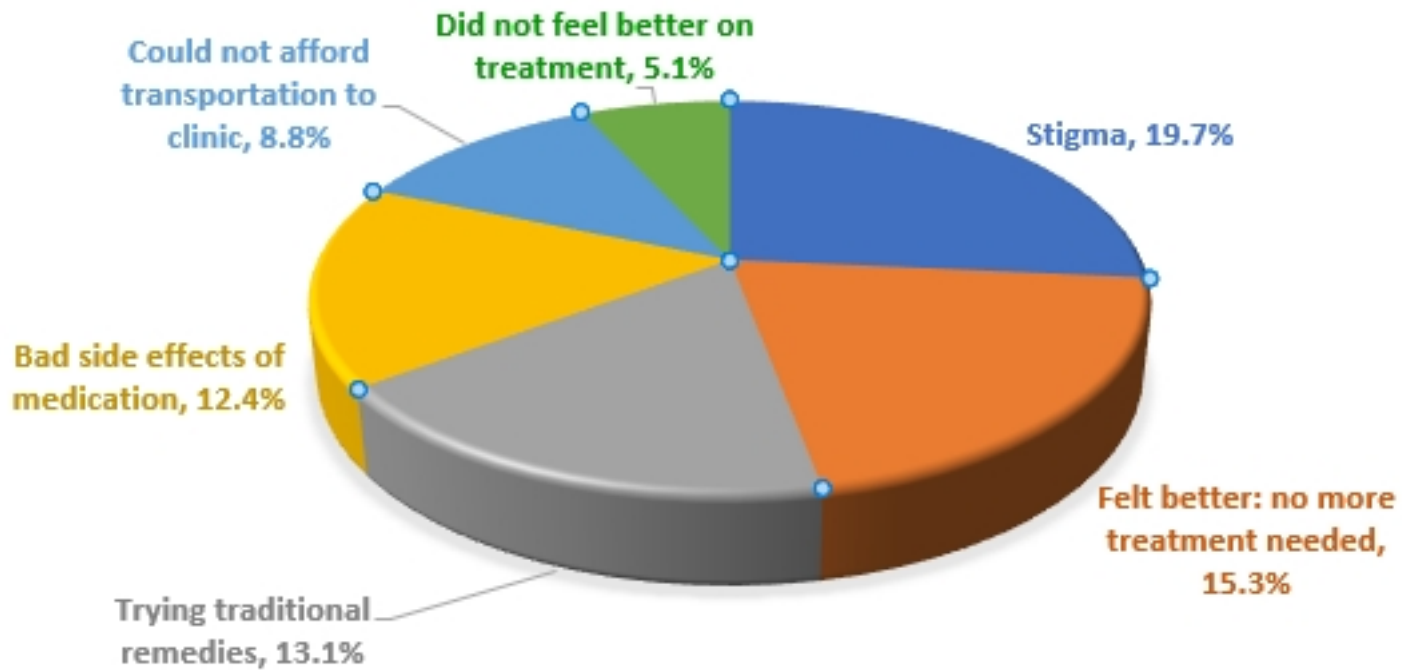
Mogadishu, 01 March 2023 – On Zero Discrimination Day (1 March), which is organized annually by UNAIDS to combat HIV/AIDS-related discrimination, WHO Somalia stands in solidarity with people living with HIV/AIDS. In 2023, the theme for the day is “Save lives: decriminalize”. While the Somali government, in partnership with WHO and other stakeholders, has made great strides in reducing the prevalence of HIV, stigma and discrimination remain and must be addressed.

WHO’s HIV/AIDS work in Somalia focuses on building the capacity of the health system to offer HIV testing, counselling and treatment, including antiretroviral therapy (ART), and conducting regular monitoring and modelling to understand the burden of HIV in the country. Despite challenges of accessibility, ongoing drought and insecurity, programme data show significant progress against HIV/AIDS. By the end of December 2022, 4100 patients were receiving ART. Some had been on the treatment since 2005 when the service was first opened in the country. Other treatment quality programme indicators show commendable performance, with Somalia holding its own in comparison with immediate neighbours, and other countries in the Region.

However, stigma and discrimination remain a major constraint. Many newly diagnosed patients avoid enrolling for treatment for fear of public stigma or enrol at distant facilities where they are unknown, jeopardizing longer term treatment adherence.

In 2022, WHO and state Ministries of Health undertook a study to examine causes for defaulting and deaths among patients on ART. Using the patients’ phone numbers on file, the study managed to reach almost a fifth of the 712 patients who had defaulted and stopped their treatment since ART first started in the country. Stigma was the number one reason given for defaulting on treatment, and was cited by 1 in 5 respondents.

## **Reasons for defaulting on ART**



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[1] FGoS /ACHESEREM. Mapping and size estimation of key vulnerable populations in Somalia, February 2023.

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