

A guide on HIV/AIDS for International Red Cross/Red Crescent delegates

HIV and YOU

The risk of HIV infection is not about who
you are or where you are – it's about what you do.



International Federation
of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Who you are

Protecting yourself from HIV/AIDS is your responsibility.

There is nothing special about being a Red Cross/Red Crescent delegate that protects you from infection with HIV, the virus that might lead to AIDS.

Some attitudes and behaviours that can be part of overseas relief and development culture may be part of what makes you vulnerable to HIV infection.

For a start, there's the "We work hard, we play hard" attitude. No one is questioning that being a field delegate can be a difficult and stressful experience. However, just as you take steps to protect yourself at work, you need to take steps to protect yourself when you relax.

If you are having sex with a person and you're not using condoms properly every time, you are putting yourself at risk.

Go easy on alcohol. Drinking often becomes a part of relaxing and it can affect your judgement and your ability to control your behaviour. It may affect your ability to use condoms correctly. If you've had too much to drink, you may even dispense with using condoms altogether.

You also need to be aware of what can happen when your life and possibly the life of other people for whom you are responsible has been threatened: for example, being involved in an ambush, an armed robbery, a mine explosion or similar terrifying incidents from which you have escaped and perhaps others have been

killed. Under such circumstances, having unprotected sex can become part of celebrating that you are alive.

You can get caught up in the elation of having escaped a brush with death. You may not think of your partner, spouse or kids. You can find yourself doing things you would never do in your country of origin – like having sex with a stranger, a co-worker, a sex worker (i.e. prostitute)...

If you have sex and you don't use condoms, you are putting yourself at risk of HIV infection. You and potentially your partner, your spouse, or anyone else you might have sex with in the future.

Whether you are having sex with a person of the opposite sex or same sex, a friend or a stranger, a co-worker or a commercial sex worker, rich or poor, young or old, if you're not using condoms properly every time, you are putting yourself at risk.



No sex or safe sex



1.
Check expiry date
on packet



2.
Pinch the teat



3.
Roll down
fully



4.
After intercourse
remove carefully
from base



5.
Tie knot and
put in bin
NOT in toilet

Remember – condoms also help to prevent unwanted pregnancy and other sexually transmitted diseases.

What you can do

- Abstain – don't have sex at all.
- Be mutually faithful – stay with one sexual partner you know and trust. This only works as a method of HIV prevention if BOTH partners practise safe behaviours.
- Use condoms correctly during every sexual encounter: vaginal, anal or oral.

Where you are

Your risk of HIV infection is not a question of where you work.

Globally, the HIV/AIDS situation may be worst in sub-Saharan Africa **but** HIV is spreading very fast in Asia, where the infection rates are already high. It is also spreading rapidly in Eastern Europe and in the N.I.S.

Rates of HIV infection in the United States, the UK, Europe and Australia are also high. There is no part of the world that has not been affected by HIV/AIDS.

Besides, government statistics on HIV are notoriously unreliable. They reflect screening practices as much as anything.

For example, Country X reports that 80% of people with HIV/AIDS are injecting drug users. So, HIV looks like a problem almost exclusively related to injecting drug use and, specifically, to sharing injecting equipment. As you're not an injecting drug user, you don't have to worry about HIV/AIDS, right?



What HIV-infected people look like

Wrong! Screening for HIV in Country X is mostly conducted among injecting drug users in detention centres. So, of course, HIV looks like an injecting drug users' problem. Screening of the population at large would probably reveal a strikingly different profile of infection.

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Some countries lack the technological capacity for accurate surveillance system. Others may even repress HIV surveillance results.

In short, your own risk of HIV cannot be determined by the AIDS profile of the country in which you are posted. It's what you do in that country that matters. Thus, you must consider everyone as potentially an HIV carrier and take all protective and preventive measures wherever you are.

HIV testing

There is length of time after a person becomes infected when HIV antibodies will not show up in a blood test. During this “window period” of up to 3 months, you can be infected with HIV but still test negative.

So, regular testing does not offer protection for you and your partner **and is not a substitute for safe sex.**

The Federation in Geneva offers confidential HIV testing and counselling services for delegates on return from their assignments. The Federation may also be able to assist in recommending counselling and testing services for delegates in the field.

What you do: Sex

You become infected with HIV when the virus transported by the semen, vaginal fluid or blood of an infected person enters your own bloodstream. Anal and vaginal sex without condoms place you at the greatest risk for infection.

For infected semen and vaginal fluids to enter your bloodstream during sex, you don't have to have any visible cuts or sores. Infected fluids can pass through the mucous membranes in the penis, vagina, anus and mouth.

However, if you or the other person have another sexually transmissible disease (STD), this can increase your risk of infection 10 times from a single encounter.



In many parts of the developing world, STDs are endemic. They are often undetected and/or improperly treated.

Most STDs are asymptomatic, especially in women. This means that you cannot necessarily tell by looking, touching, smelling or tasting that either you or the person with whom you are having sex is infected with an STD.

It is difficult to know if a person has an STD just by looking, touching, smelling or tasting.

To have safe oral sex, you also need to use condoms. Avoiding oral sex if your mouth is damaged can protect you from other STDs as well.

High-quality condoms are freely available at the Federation for people leaving on overseas assignments. Take condoms with you as they may not be available at your final destination. Take more than you think you'll need.

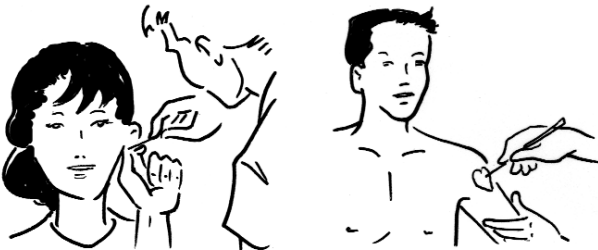
Using condoms can protect you from both HIV infection and a whole range of STDs. Condoms can also protect you from unplanned pregnancy or from unwittingly impregnating another person.

What you do: Blood

HIV can also be spread when infected blood passes from one person to another.



This can happen through the sharing of needles and syringes. If you are injecting any sort of drug, be sure that only sterile needles and syringes are used and do not share needles and syringes with anyone.



Ear-piercing, acupuncture, tattooing, dental treatment and sharing razors are also risky, so make sure that all instruments that enter your body have been sterilised.

When providing first aid to members of the general public in any country certain universal precautions should be taken to avoid accidental infection with HIV. These guidelines are available from the health and care department of the Federation.

The Federation policy for staff and delegates on HIV/AIDS outlines the procedure for documenting potential accidental or professional HIV transmission.

The Federation Policy

The Federation's HIV/AIDS policy for all staff and delegates is guided by the fundamental principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The Federation endorses a non-discriminatory approach to people living with HIV/AIDS. Their specific policy outlines the rights of delegates who may be HIV-positive, including respect for confidentiality.

The policy is based on the scientific evidence that people with HIV infection or AIDS do not pose a risk of transmission of the virus to co-workers through ordinary contact in the workplace.

As a Red Cross or Red Crescent delegate, there is no risk of infection posed to you through day-to-day work or social contact with people living with HIV/AIDS.

HIV cannot be transmitted by touching or shaking hands. It is not transmitted by social kissing. Using the same toilet, sharing food, eating and drinking utensils, telephones and office equipment, do not place you at risk of HIV infection.

As a Red Cross/Red Crescent delegate, you can draw on the fundamental principles of the movement in order to ensure respect and compassion for local and expatriate co-workers who may be infected with HIV or have AIDS.





The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies promotes the humanitarian activities of National Societies among vulnerable people.

By coordinating international relief and encouraging development support it seeks to prevent and alleviate human suffering.

The Federation, the National Societies and the International Committee of the Red Cross together constitute the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

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