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# Teach and reach youth about HIV/AIDS

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## The picture of HIV/AIDS today

Yolanda is hanging around as the others are leaving after the youth group meeting. With a frightened look, she asks to talk with you. She tells you she just found out she is HIV positive. How do you respond?

Yolanda is part of an alarming trend in the United States. The statistics are disturbing:

- Half of all new HIV infections in the U.S. occur in people under age 25. One fourth of infections occur in people under the age of 21, with the majority of young people being infected sexually.
- Among youth age 13 to 19, 57% of reported HIV infections occur among young women and 43% among young men.
- Although African American and Latin teens represent about 30% of the teen population, they account for most of the new AIDS cases reported among teens.
- A significant percentage of young people are sexually active. Many do not perceive themselves at risk for becoming infected with HIV.
- Young women new to sex generally have older partners, who often persuade them they do not need to use protection.

Although new diagnoses of HIV declined remarkably for people aged 25-34 during the late 1990's and into the twenty-first century, new diagnoses of HIV for young people aged 24 and younger remained stable during the same period. Each generation of youth needs to learn about HIV prevention.

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## Talking about HIV/AIDS

For many, HIV/AIDS is not an easy, comfortable topic of discussion. It requires open and honest discussion about sexuality, drug use, being ostracized, fear, death, grief and more. It also requires that parents and leaders face the reality that there may be young people in their congregation who participate in at-risk behaviors. Some of the young people may already be HIV positive or know someone who is. Consider these tips in talking about the disease in a safe, faith-filled environment:

- Tell parents you'll be talking about HIV/AIDS. In advance, share with them your content outline, perspective and learning activities.
- Find out what the youth already know about HIV/AIDS. Knowledge of how the virus is transmitted is basic and essential. Separate the myths from the facts. Beyond the basics, many young people want to know how to protect themselves, where to go to get tested, and how to talk with their parents and partners. Research states that all young people, regardless of age, sex, race/ethnicity, or whether or not they are sexually active, want to know more.

- Assume that someone in your group and/or congregation is HIV positive, and that some members in your group participate in at-risk behaviors for contracting the virus. Invite a person who is HIV positive to talk to your group; it helps to make the pandemic real.
- Set appropriate boundaries for the discussion. Boundaries include appropriate behavior before and after the group meets, respect for what is said by all members of the group, and adhering to confidentiality of the discussion.
- Group dynamics and trust level of the group will influence the success of the discussion. It may take your group a while to get comfortable talking about HIV/AIDS.
- Help group members make faith connections with the facts about HIV/AIDS.

Be prepared to follow-up on an individual level. The discussion(s) may trigger questions, unresolved emotions, a need for more information, and so forth.

## Infection and treatment

HIV is a virus that infects certain cells in our immune system. Once infected, the virus uses the cells to replicate. The new cells function improperly and die prematurely, thus weakening the immune system. Infections develop and flourish when the immune system is damaged by HIV.

One way to combat the virus is by the use of anti-HIV therapy to slow or stop the ability of the virus to reproduce. The goal is to slow or stop the progression of HIV disease and the destruction of the immune system. Other approaches have been proposed and tried, but so far anti-HIV therapy is the only treatment shown effective in slowing the progression of the disease. The good news is that it can decrease the death rates of those infected and allow some people to live out a fairly normal lifespan despite HIV.

Anti-HIV therapies are not simple and do not hold guarantees. Making wise decisions about their use requires understanding the benefits and risks, working closely with a knowledgeable doctor, and monitoring through lab tests.

One challenge with anti-HIV therapy is that it can't completely eradicate HIV from a person's body. Over time, the virus can change enough so that it is no longer affected by the drugs. This process is called viral resistance and is likely to happen with almost all anti-HIV drugs to some extent. This reality is why it is vital for people to understand that there is no cure and taking the anti-HIV drugs requires a tremendous amount of commitment. The best long-term hope for controlling the AIDS epidemic in the United States and around the world is to develop a safe, effective and affordable preventive HIV vaccine. Scientists have been studying HIV for over two decades and continue to make progress. Even when an HIV vaccine is developed, education and other prevention efforts will be needed so people will continue to practice safe behaviors.

## Myths and Facts

### Myths

HIV is **not** transmitted by:

- donating blood
- mosquito bites or bites from other bugs
- sneezes or coughs
- touching, hugging or dry kissing a person with HIV
- urine or sweat of an infected person
- public restrooms, saunas, showers or pools
- sharing towels, clothing, eating utensils or drinks
- being friends with a person who has HIV/AIDS

### Facts

HIV **is** transmitted by:

- sexual intercourse
- sores or breaks in the mucous membrane or skin that are exposed to infected blood, semen, or vaginal secretions
- shared razors, tattoo, or piercing equipment which might have blood on them
- shared syringes, needles and cookers
- breast milk

(Information for this section taken from [Project Inform](#) and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For more treatment information visit the [Web sites listed below](#).)

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## Ideas for action

- Encourage young people to help others through education, advocacy, and care giving.
- Ask worship leaders/pastors to include HIV/AIDS stories, issues, and concerns in sermons and prayers.
- Invite someone with HIV/AIDS to speak during worship or education programs.
- Volunteer to visit, provide meals, transportation, or other services to people living with AIDS in your congregation and community.
- Write stories about experiences you, your friends, or your family has had related to HIV/AIDS.
- Share them with your congregation and/or community.
- Volunteer to provide HIV prevention education to younger youth and children in your congregation.
- Wear red AIDS awareness ribbons.
- Contact community, state, and national leaders to advocate for legislation and programs that provide prevention education, care, and medicines and that fight discrimination and stigma for those infected and affected by HIV.
- Plan World AIDS Day activities. Visit [www.elca.org/dcs/worldaidsday](http://www.elca.org/dcs/worldaidsday) for ideas.

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## Resources

- **AIDS and the Church's Ministry of Caring, the ELCA Message on AIDS.** Available at [www.elca.org/socialstatements/aids](http://www.elca.org/socialstatements/aids).
- **The Lutheran AIDS Network has made their curriculum: *Brokenness to Wholeness: Update for the 21st Century* available on their Web site, [www.lutheranaids.net](http://www.lutheranaids.net).** It is designed to be used with a variety of programs (including confirmation) with various ages of youth. The goals for the curriculum are as follows:
  1. To help participants explore how risk behaviors relate to the brokenness we find in our communities, our relationships, and in ourselves.
  2. To help participants understand the facts about transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS and how it affects preteen, adolescent, and young adult populations.
  3. To help participants explore the differences between life-enhancing and risk-producing behaviors and the values that influence their decisions to choose between them.
  4. To help participants plan ways to respond, both individually and as a community of faith, to others who are infected with HIV.
- Visit [www.standwithafrica.org/ytaa](http://www.standwithafrica.org/ytaa) for teaching and learning resources for middle school youth about AIDS, especially in Africa. This part of the Stand With Africa site has interactive games, teacher resources, learning activities, and related links.

### Faith based HIV/AIDS Web sites:

- ELCA: [www.elca.org/dcs/HIV/aids.html](http://www.elca.org/dcs/HIV/aids.html)
- Lutheran AIDS Network: [www.lutheranaids.net](http://www.lutheranaids.net)
- The Balm in Gilead (African American): [www.balmingilead.org](http://www.balmingilead.org)
- Church World Service: [www.churchworldservice.org](http://www.churchworldservice.org)
- Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance: [www.e-alliance.ch/hiv aids.jsp](http://www.e-alliance.ch/hiv aids.jsp)
- Ecumenical HIV/AIDS Initiative in Africa (EHAIA) (part of World Council of Churches Web site): [www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/ehaia-e.html](http://www.wcc-coe.org/wcc/what/mission/ehaia-e.html)
- National Catholic AIDS Network: [www.ncan.org](http://www.ncan.org)

- **National Episcopal AIDS Coalition:** [www.neac.org](http://www.neac.org)
- **Religion and AIDS Resources:** [www.thebody.com/religion.html](http://www.thebody.com/religion.html)
- **Stand With Africa:** [www.standwithafrica.org](http://www.standwithafrica.org)
- **United Methodist HIV/AIDS Network:** <http://gbgm-umc.org/health/aids>

### Web sites designed for youth:

- **Advocates for Youth:** [www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/health/hiv/transmission.htm](http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/youth/health/hiv/transmission.htm)
- **Center for Disease Control:** [www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/facts/youth.htm](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/facts/youth.htm)
- **The Body: Young People and HIV/AIDS:** [www.thebody.com/whatis/children.html](http://www.thebody.com/whatis/children.html)
- **Youth & HIV/AIDS from the Kaiser Family Foundation:**  
[www.kff.org/youthhivstds/index.cfm](http://www.kff.org/youthhivstds/index.cfm)

### General Information Web Sites:

- **American Red Cross:** [www.redcross.org](http://www.redcross.org)
- **CDC National AIDS Clearinghouse:** [www.cdcnpin.org](http://www.cdcnpin.org)
- **CONASIDA (Spanish):** [www.ssa.gob.mx/conasida/](http://www.ssa.gob.mx/conasida/)
- **Joint United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS):** [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org)
- **National Minority AIDS Council:** [www.thebody.com/nmac/nmacpage.html](http://www.thebody.com/nmac/nmacpage.html)
- **World Health Organization (WHO):** [www.who.int/hiv/en](http://www.who.int/hiv/en)

### Medical information Web sites:

- **Body Health Resources Corporation:** [www.thebody.com](http://www.thebody.com)
- **HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service:** <http://aidsinfo.nih.gov>
- **HIV Positive:** [www.HIVpositive.com/index.html](http://www.HIVpositive.com/index.html)
- **National Institute of Health:** [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)
- **Project Inform:** [www.projinf.org](http://www.projinf.org)

For more information about HIV/AIDS, youth learning suggestions, and additional Web sites, visit [www.elca.org/dcs/HIV/aids.html](http://www.elca.org/dcs/HIV/aids.html).

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Contributed by *Mary Ingram Zentner*  
Gurnee, IL

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