

Taso is an organization assisting people living with HIV/AIDS.

**CHAPTER 1**



FAO/17392/K. Dunn

**C**ommunity extension services are under ever increasing pressure to respond to the growing challenges of making differences in the quality of life of rural farming communities. It is becoming more and more obvious that the AIDS epidemic is increasingly disrupting the farming and production systems of rural households, by increased sickness and deaths especially among the productive age group, the emotional and financial impact this is having on rural households is really terrible. The challenge that now faces the extension worker is to create opportunities and conditions that will increase awareness on HIV/AIDS prevention, care and its impact on households and to promote strategies that would improve food security, nutrition and incomes among rural men and women farmers and their families. Women and men farmers need to stay healthy, strong and protected from diseases in order to be able to maintain or increase their farming activities for the welfare (physical, financial and psychological) of their household and for themselves.

This chapter gives basic understanding of HIV and AIDS and how these are interrelated. It also reinforces HIV/AIDS prevention and care messages that you and other members of the community should follow, in order to remain healthy, strong and protected.

**The meaning of HIV**

**Human:** Human beings

**Immuno-deficiency:** A weakening in the body’s immune system that fights diseases

**Virus:** An infectious organism which multiplies and destroys human body cells

When HIV enters our bodies, it attacks and destroys white blood cells. White blood cells form part of the immune system that protects our bodies against germs that could cause diseases.

**The meaning of AIDS**

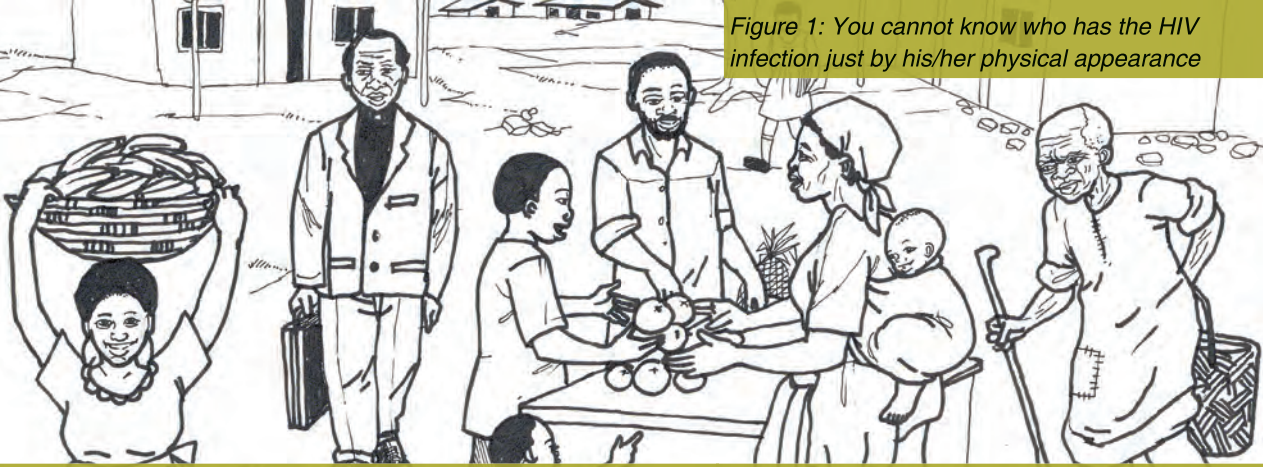
**Acquired:** We get HIV as a result of it being passed on from a person who already has it.

**Immune Deficiency:** A weakening in the body’s ability to fight off germs and illnesses

**Syndrome:** A group of health problems or diseases that occur together or one after another

After a person acquires HIV, he/she can spend a number of years looking healthy and strong. During this time HIV is slowly damaging his/her immune system, which weakens his/her body’s ability to fight off germs and illnesses, resulting into him/her suffering from a combination of illnesses, such as tuberculosis (TB), pneumonia, diarrhoea and skin infections.

Figure 1: You cannot know who has the HIV infection just by his/her physical appearance



## How HIV is spread

1. Having unprotected sexual intercourse with a person with HIV
2. Blood-to-blood contact, for example being transfused with HIV infected blood and sharing contaminated skin piercing instruments such as dirty injecting needles, razor blades and safety pins.
3. A pregnant woman with HIV may pass on the virus to her unborn baby during pregnancy, at delivery and during breastfeeding.

## Ways in which HIV is NOT transmitted

There are many misconceptions and beliefs in society about HIV and AIDS, which are not true. HIV is not passed on to others by any casual contact such as shaking hands, hugging, playing together, sharing the toilet or bathroom, sitting together or through insect bites or through witchcraft. Some people believe that HIV is caused by witchcraft spells or can be cured by witchcraft. Again this is not true. There is no traditional or scientific cure for HIV and AIDS.

## Social factors that may lead people to acquire HIV

Extension workers, farmers and other members of the community are all at risk of acquiring HIV/AIDS. There are certain factors and situations that can contribute more easily to men and women getting HIV. Some of these are:

- When Boys and girls are going through the adolescence stage, very often they are not told anything about their sexuality or the connection between sexual activity and HIV/AIDS. During this stage, they are often put under terrible pressure to engage in sexual intercourse, before they understand what it is and before they are ready for it.
- Early marriages, widow or widower inheritance and polygamy can often increase the risk of exposure to the AIDS virus.
- Traditional witchcraft practices like incising the body and ritual cleansing involving having sex with the healers, an albino or a virgin child (some people believe that if they have sexual intercourse with a virgin they will be cured) are all practices that have the potential to contribute to the spread of the AIDS virus.
- Occupations like long distance driving, fishing away from the community and periodic migrating in search of work in towns means that these people often spend long periods away from their spouses and as such risk being tempted to have extra-marital sexual affairs.
- Engaging in prostitution.
- Taking excessive amounts of alcohol and being addicted to narcotic drugs.
- Lack of awareness about HIV and AIDS and denial about HIV and AIDS.

All of us should reduce the risk of acquiring HIV by adopting the **ABC** of HIV prevention

**A**bstain from sex altogether, or

**B**e faithful to one uninfected partner, who should also be faithful, or use

**C**ondoms correctly and consistently every time you have sexual intercourse.

The **ABC** is also known as the safer sex option.

**Voluntary Counselling and Testing services (VCT)** can help individuals to understand more of how they can protect themselves against HIV infection.

**Prevention of Mother to Child Transmission (PMTCT)** is another service that can help a pregnant mother with HIV to protect her unborn child from acquiring HIV infection and also to understand what she needs to do in order to take care of herself and her baby properly. Both VCT and PMTCT services can be accessed from the major hospitals and health centres in the country.

*Figure 2: Voluntary counselling and testing services can help you to get more information and encouragement on HIV prevention and care*



### **Issues for the extension worker to note:**

- Vulnerable people, who are in the majority of cases women and children, do not often have the option of choosing their sexual partners and/or habits.
- Within marriages women often cannot negotiate the use of a condom, therefore any awareness raising activities about the use of condoms should ensure the participation of both women and men in information sharing.
- Condoms can protect against other sexually transmitted diseases.
- Female condoms are now available in Uganda. Like the male condom, the female condom is a barrier between a man's penis and a woman's vagina.
- All of us should seek further information and assistance on understanding ways of prevention from health workers in our community.

## Guide for the extension worker

### Using the vulnerability checklist to assess the risk of HIV/AIDS to your community

The following list should be used with sensitivity towards those men and women we are working with in the community. If possible information on the issues raised below should be taken from health institutions or other available literature, as if it is used to question individuals or their social behaviour, it may increase stigma for the categories of people described:

- Multiple sexual partners
- Migrating for waged work in towns
- High alcohol and narcotic drug consumption
- Proximity to trading centres
- Limited economic independence of women
- Physically damaging sexual practices
- Strong belief in widow inheritance
- Low status of women prevailing
- Commercial sex activities
- Stop-over townships for long distance drivers or traders
- Wide spread ignorance on facts about HIV and AIDS
- Denial about HIV and AIDS
- Absence of health care services

### If vulnerability to HIV/AIDS in your community is high, what could be your role as an extension worker? You could do some of the following:

- Discuss the situation with other extension workers, service providers and civic leaders in order to develop or work with an existing programme to create awareness about the dangers of HIV/AIDS and how to prevent it.
- Visit a health worker who is working with men and women affected by the pandemic at the nearest health center to get more information and understanding about HIV and AIDS, and the actions being taken to combat the disease.
- Liaise with AIDS care organisations to plan for sensitising your community about the dangers of HIV/AIDS, including care and prevention.
- Provide information on facts about HIV/AIDS at sessions you hold with women and men farmers, during your routine activities.
- Invite a health worker to come and talk to farmers (women and men together if socially acceptable, otherwise in separate groups) in your community about HIV/AIDS and how to prevent it.

## Questions that you, the extension worker, can ask yourself:

1. When I want to share information with men, women and youth at the community level, whom should I be working with (in terms of community members and outside service providers)? What methods can I use?
2. Has information on HIV/AIDS been shared with the community already? If yes, who was involved in giving this information? When was this information shared? Who did they meet with at the community level? What was the message given?
3. How do I go about understanding what people in the community already know about HIV/AIDS? Based on the vulnerability assessment of the HIV/AIDS risk, what information, knowledge and skills do men, women, boys and girls need in order to reduce the risk to HIV infection?
4. How can I make HIV/AIDS awareness and education a central part of my on-going extension messages and work with the community?
5. How can I share messages with the community in a way that will NOT create stigma for certain men and women in the community?

Note that responses to some of these questions are provided for in the following chapters.

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