

AIDS

KNOWING THE FACTS

Saturday noon, a truck is driving towards the graveyard. The young people on the back are wearing red ribbons. When the truck stops, they climb down and are joined by others dressed in red and black, who have lined up their cars along the road. All of them are here to say a last farewell to Gifty. Gifty's two children are there too, held by their grandmother and aunt. Brothers and sisters, cousins, uncles and aunts, and lots of young friends gather around the grave...

... Many of Gifty's friends remember her as the most beautiful girl at school. As the girlfriend of the smartest guy at the boarding school, she was envied by her schoolmates. Six years ago she married a nice man named John. John was a business man, and travelled a lot. Life seemed perfect to Gifty when she gave birth to Ken, and two years later to Mary.

But then John got sick and died. Mary's health wasn't good either. The little girl was plagued with fever attacks and a severe cough. Gifty, who after John's death returned to her mother's home, worked hard to feed the family and to buy medicine for Mary. Gifty cared lovingly for her children. She paid for Mary's medicine but couldn't afford to look after her own needs. As time went by, she got overtired, then she started to lose weight dramatically. Some days she could hardly do her job. After a while she started to cough. Weeks and months passed by and the cough got worse. Finally she got a severe fever with shortness of breath; her body was too weak to fight the illness. After a long struggle against all of these various health problems, Gifty died, not even thirty yet.

The coffin is lowered into the ground. So many people around the grave, do they consider why Gifty died so young? – She died of a severe fever. – *Oh – But, why was her body too weak to fight the fever?* – She worked too hard. – *And the cough?* – Don't we all cough from time to time? – *Yes, but not for months, do we?* – Nobody would dare to say why Gifty died; they wouldn't want to bring shame to the family. *They wouldn't say it, but do all these young friends of hers consider*

the real reason? It might be life saving for them to be aware that it wasn't the fever which killed Gifty but AIDS.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is a disease which comes from a *virus* called HIV.

- H** stands for *Human* and means: It affects people, human beings.
- I** stands for *Immune Deficiency*: Immune comes from immunity and means the body's ability to fight sickness. Deficiency means lack of something. Together it means that our immune system lacks the ability to fight diseases and therefore our body catches many diseases.
- V** stands for *Virus* and means: a special kind of germ, which attacks our body. *(taken from: Flyer on HIV/AIDS from PPAG)*
- A** stands for *Acquired* and it means: got from others, it comes from outside your body.
- I** stands for *Immune* and
- D** stands for *Deficiency* and together they mean: lack of natural protection against sickness.
- S** stands for *Syndrome* and means: a collection of signs and symptoms which characterise a condition. *(taken from: "Let's talk about", Susanne Knispel)*

People who are infected with HIV will not get sick straight away. They look strong, beautiful and healthy. Only a medical test will show they have the virus. If a person has the virus the test result will be HIV positive. Someone who is *HIV positive* may pass the disease on to

others without even knowing. This stage of the disease is hidden, and may last up to 10 years. HIV is most infectious during the first weeks after a person has been infected – when there are no signs of sickness, and nobody even thinks of HIV. It is also very infectious when the signs and symptoms of AIDS appear.

After a person has been infected, the virus enters certain cells of the body which protect us from sickness (the immune system). The virus multiplies and destroys these protecting cells. The immune system of the person gets weaker and weaker over time. It cannot fight off other infections and diseases. The person may then start to lose weight and fall sick with pneumonia, tuberculosis, severe diarrhoea and other sicknesses and eventually die of them.

When an HIV positive person starts to show symptoms of one or several of these diseases, her condition has progressed into AIDS.

Back to Gifty. The first symptoms of AIDS showed when she started to lose weight. Then she had a cough for a long time, which was a sign of chronic infection or even tuberculosis. As her body was weakened, she fell ill with pneumonia which explains the shortness of breath and the high fever. That's what she died of. But the reason for her death was not the fever, it was AIDS. The virus had destroyed the protecting cells of her body, making it impossible for her immune system to protect her from infections.

HOW IS AIDS SPREAD?

The virus (HIV) lives in the blood, seed, vaginal and other body fluids of an infected person. Any contact with these bodily fluids will expose you to the risk of getting infected.

AIDS is spread in different ways:

1. Through sex with an infected partner. Changing partners increases the risk of getting infected. Gifty, (who was admired by all young men), was the girlfriend of a number of different guys before she got married. Many of these relationships became sexual and she got infected. John, her husband, had also been infected by having casual sex on his travels.
2. From an infected mother to her unborn child, during birth, or possibly through breast milk. When Gifty was pregnant the virus was passed on to Mary. That's why Mary wasn't in good health.
3. Through contact with infected blood. This can happen through blood transfusions, injections with non-sterile needles, or in drug abuse through sharing needles. Also, through used razor blades and piercing needles. Never share razor blades or piercing needles, not even with your best friend or family members. Don't let another person's blood touch your skin, mouth or eyes.

AIDS is not spread by mosquito bites, hand shaking, playing and working together, sharing plates and cups, being coughed at, sitting in a crowded place, sharing a toilet or bathroom, sleeping in one bed without having sex, kissing.

EPIDEMIC

Data published by World Health Organisation (WHO) shows that in 2007 there were globally 33.2 million people estimated to be living with HIV and 2.1 million died of AIDS. About 68% of the global total of people living with HIV, are in sub-Saharan Africa. These huge numbers are beyond our imagination and seem of little concern to us. But tragic deaths of close friends or family members like Gifty bring the reality into the midst of our lives. Nobody likes to talk about AIDS. It is a term full of fear, grief and shame. But to save lives, we must talk about it. Our children, youth and young adults need to be educated on how to prevent HIV/AIDS. Prevention must be the goal, because AIDS is a deadly sickness which wipes out generations of young adults, parents of small children, carers of elderly people and supporters of society.

HOW CAN I AVOID AIDS?

ABC has been proclaimed as the best active prevention.

A › Abstinence before marriage

Say a firm NO to any sexual practice before marriage.

Even as a child or young person you have the right to say NO to any family member, teacher, sugar daddy or other person with authority who wants to use you for his sexual pleasure. If you are being abused in this way, it is not your fault. God sees the wrong that has been done to you. He loves you and wants to heal your hurts. Reach out to someone you trust, confide in them and ask for their help.

Do not engage in sex before marriage. Don't start a friendship (girlfriend, boyfriend) if you are not ready for marriage yet. This lowers the risk of sexual activity before marriage.

“Run away from sexual sin! No other sin so clearly affects the body as this one does. For sexual immorality is a sin against your own body . . . For God bought you with a high price. So you must honour God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:18-20).

B › Be faithful to your marriage partner.

Sex is for marriage alone. This is a law, given by God, in order to protect us and keep us safe from both physical and emotional pain. Sex outside of marriage is called adultery, and is wrong. It destroys the loving relationship between husband and wife. It carries the high risk of infection and death not only for yourself but much more for your partner.

“Give honour to marriage, and remain faithful to one another in marriage. God will surely judge people who are immoral and those who commit adultery” (Hebrews 13:4).

C › Condoms

C stands for Condom use. People who do not agree with A and B may use this as an alternative. Condoms can offer some protection against the virus being passed on through sex. It is very important that they are handled carefully, used consistently and properly. However, they are not 100% effective. If they are not used properly, or have been damaged through incorrect storage, they will no longer protect against AIDS.

Within marriage, condoms must be used if one partner is HIV positive or is unfaithful, to protect the other person. Condoms can

also be used for family planning. It is fine to use condoms within marriage for these reasons.

However, using condoms to engage in sex before marriage, or outside marriage is not the ultimate answer. God has given us the gift of sexuality for marriage. Other practices bring a lot of heart-ache and sorrow to our lives and stand between us and our God. Therefore I encourage you to live your life in obedience to God's good will.

› **C** for **Christ** Jesus

Believe and obey His Word (Gospel).

Christ Jesus is the Son of God. Over 2000 years ago, he was born as a baby and grew up on this earth. Why did he come? God saw a world in need, a world of broken, sick and hopeless people. He sent His son Jesus to save the lost people, bring healing and hope and to show us how much God loves us. Jesus was perfect, He didn't do anything wrong, but He was nailed to a cross and crucified. Why? He did this to pay the price for our wrong thoughts and actions – so that by accepting him into our lives we can come near to God again.

“What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone.

A new life has begun!

... For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ”
(2 Corinthians 5:17,21).

Christ Jesus can bring amazing hope into our lives, no matter what our circumstances are. When we believe in him, we can be forgiven for our sin and welcomed into the family of God! Jesus has promised never to leave us. He gives us strength to cope with our problems and helps us to forgive those who have hurt us.

People who choose to have this new life in union with Jesus Christ are no longer limited to this earth and to their earthly bodies. When they die, they will join him in heaven, where they will live forever, enjoying the presence of God! Here is a description of heaven from the Bible:

“Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).

The knowledge of heaven should reassure us and give us hope and purpose while we face our daily challenges. God will make all things right, rewarding our trust in him. We encourage you to put C for Christ Jesus. Maybe it will help you pray the following prayer, and to sign and date it, to remind yourself of the promise you have made.

Lord Jesus I am sorry for the things that I have done wrong. I thank you that you died on a cross for me. I am willing to turn away from anything that displeases you in my life and from this day on I want to live my life your way.

In the name of Jesus Christ and with HIS strength I promise not to engage in sex before marriage from today on.

In the name of Jesus Christ and with HIS strength I promise to be faithful to my marriage partner from today on.

Place, Date:

Signature:

Signature of witness:

Join a group of like-minded people, who also want to live the way God has told us to. Study God's word regularly so that you can understand better what His will is. Pray and thank God for freedom from sinful habits and for His help. Do not put yourself at risk.

IS THERE A CURE FOR HIV/AIDS?

Beliefs of being cured by sleeping with a virgin are false and make things worse by infecting the young girls.

It is proved that no traditional doctor can heal AIDS.

There is still no vaccine available and no permanent cure. Antiretroviral therapy (ARV) can weaken the virus and stop you from getting sick so often, but it cannot cure the disease. Once you are infected with HIV it will remain alive in your body for the rest of your life. That is why if you stop the treatment, the virus will come back in full strength.

Even when you are taking the drugs, you can still pass on the virus to other people. The drugs may also make you feel weak and have negative side effects, but they can help you live longer and with less suffering from continual illnesses.

The life-long therapy consists of a combination of at least three antiretroviral drugs. Unfortunately, there is no guarantee that everyone who needs these drugs will be able to get them. Therefore, it is important that you take action if you think you are at risk.

WHAT IF YOU THINK YOU MIGHT BE INFECTED?

Contact your nearest health facility where they can refer you to an HIV/AIDS counsellor.

Although it may be frightening, it's very important to have an HIV test. This way you will know where you stand, you can look for the necessary health-care and you can protect the people around you from being infected.

Several clinics in the country offer HIV-tests. Also, Korle Bu Teaching Hospital, "37" Military Hospital, and Komfo Anokye Hospital in Ghana offer confidential tests, counselling and the vital treatment that you need for affordable fees.

If you are HIV positive or suffer from AIDS you are facing a big challenge. Fear of rejection from family, friends and at work may

keep you from seeking help. But you will need help, so don't be afraid to look for it. Try to find a Christian counsellor who can help you find peace with God, advice for your day to day life, and hope which goes beyond earthly life. Churches may have awareness groups where you can find support, acceptance and love.

It is important that you eat healthy food, that you take care of yourself and that you don't give up, because God has not given up on you.

Trust in God and believe in Jesus. Jesus invites you to bring your pain, your experiences and your failures to Him. He offers forgiveness and a new life in Him, filled with meaning and hope. God loves you, and wants to help you: you are not alone. So choose life, not death.

I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea: "Do not close your ears to my cry for relief." You came near when I called you, and you said, "Do not fear." O Lord, you took up my case; you redeemed my life (Lamentations 3:55-58).

MS/RS

Sources: NIV Bible / AIDS information leaflets / Website: <http://www.who.int/en/>

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