

SA cuts new HIV infections by one-third

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According to the 2010 UNAids Report on the global Aids epidemic, SA has decreased its rate of new HIV infections in the country by more than a third over the past 10 years.

South Africa has decreased the rate of new HIV infections in the country by more than one-third over the past 10 years, contributing to a significant slowing down or stabilising of new HIV infections worldwide, according to the 2010 UNAids Report on the global Aids epidemic.

Released by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/Aids (UNAids) on 23 November, the report finds that the global Aids epidemic is beginning to change course as the number of people newly infected with HIV declines and Aids-related deaths decrease.

"Together, this is contributing to the stabilisation of the total number of people living with HIV in the world," UNAids said in a statement.

Data from the 2010 UNAids Report shows that around 2.6-million people worldwide became newly infected with HIV in 2010, nearly 20% fewer than the approximate 3.1-million people infected in 1999.

In 2009, around 1.8-million people died from Aids-related illnesses worldwide, nearly one-fifth lower than the approximate 2.1-million people who died in 2004.

At the end of 2009, around 33.3-million people worldwide were estimated to be living with HIV, up slightly from 32.8-million in 2008 – due in large part due to more people living longer as access to antiretroviral therapy increases.

"We are breaking the trajectory of the Aids epidemic with bold actions and smart choices," UNAids executive director Michel Sidibé said in a statement. "Investments in the Aids response are paying off, but gains are fragile – the challenge now is how we can all work to accelerate progress."

Sub-Saharan Africa 'turning the HIV tide'

The report gives new evidence that investments in HIV prevention programmes are producing significant results in many of the countries with the highest HIV/Aids burdens.

From 2001 to 2009, the report finds, the rate of new HIV infections stabilised or decreased by more than 25% in at least 56 countries, including 34 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Of the five countries with the largest epidemics in [sub-Saharan Africa], four countries – Ethiopia, South Africa, Zambia and Zimbabwe – have reduced rates of new HIV infections by more than 25%, while Nigeria's epidemic has stabilised."

The report finds that, among young people in 15 of the most severely affected countries, the rate of new HIV infections has fallen by more than 25%, led by young people adopting safer sexual practices.

"In South Africa, the rate of new HIV infections among 18-year-olds declined sharply, from 1.8% in 2005 to 0.8% in 2008, and among women aged between 15 and 24 years it dropped from 5.5% to 2.2% between 2003 and 2008."

In addition, as more countries use effective treatment regimens to prevent HIV transmission to babies, the total number of children born with HIV has decreased. Significant gains were made in sub-Saharan Africa, where new HIV infections among children have fallen 32% in the past five years.

Huge challenges remain

At the same time, the UNAids report cautions, while the number of new HIV infections is decreasing worldwide, there are still two new HIV infections for every one person starting HIV treatment.

"Investments in HIV prevention programmes as whole have not been adequate or efficiently allocated. HIV prevention investments comprise about 22% of all Aids-related spending in low- and middle-income countries."

And while the number of people on HIV treatment worldwide increased by seven-and-a-half times over the last five years – 5.2-million people accessed life-saving drugs in 2009 compared to 700 000 in 2004 – nearly twice that the number of people, 10-million, are still waiting for treatment.

UNAids notes that funding from international sources appears to be reducing, with donor government disbursements for the Aids response standing at US\$7.6-billion in 2009, down from the \$7.7-billion available in 2008 and far short of what is required.

"Declines in international investments would affect low-income countries the most – nearly 90% rely on international funding for their Aids programmes."

The report further highlights the "urgent need to sustain and scale up good investments and for countries to share the financial burden of the epidemic".

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