

EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

In Eastern Europe and Central Asia the number of people living with HIV has risen dramatically in just a few years—reaching an estimated 1.4 million at the end of 2004. This is an increase of more than nine-fold in less than ten years. There are currently around 490 000 women living with HIV in the region. Some 210 000 people were newly infected with HIV in the past year, while an estimated 60 000 died of AIDS.

- Diverse HIV epidemics are underway in this region. The most serious and firmly-established epidemic is in Ukraine, which is experiencing a new surge of infections. The Russian Federation is home to the largest epidemic in the entire region and Europe.
- The Russian Federation accounts for some 70% of all HIV infections officially registered in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. An estimated 860 000 people were living with HIV in Russia at the end of 2003, 80% of them aged 15–29 years and more than one third of them women.
- Between 1.5 and 3 million Russians are believed to inject drugs (1% to 2% of the entire population), and an estimated 30% to 40% of injecting drug users use non-sterile needles or syringes, which massively boosts the chances of HIV transmission.
- In 2004, more than 80% of all officially reported HIV cases since the beginning of the epidemic had been among drug injectors. But the majority of drug injectors are sexually active—upwards of 70%, according to studies in several Russian cities, indicating the potential threat of further transmission.
- Reported cases of pregnant women with HIV in Russia have increased from just 125 in 1998 to 3531 in 2003.
- Ukraine's epidemic continues to expand. Newly registered HIV infections have been increasing annually since the turn of the century— by 7% in 2000, 13% in 2001 and 25% in 2002.
- In Ukraine, some 30% of new HIV infections registered in 2003 occurred during heterosexual intercourse and more than 40% of people living with HIV are women.
- The deadly combination of HIV and tuberculosis is a serious concern in Ukraine, where 10-15% of TB cases are estimated to be multi-drug resistant. Tuberculosis has become the leading cause of death among people living with HIV.
- Currently, only around 500 of the estimated 45 000 people who need antiretroviral treatment in Ukraine are receiving it, despite the fact that treatment access for all is guaranteed by Ukrainian law.
- In the Baltic states, HIV transmission is occurring at a brisk rate, even if the

overall numbers of infections remain low. The total number of HIV diagnoses in Latvia has risen five-fold since 1999, to 2300 in 2002. Just four years ago, Estonia reported 12 new HIV cases; in 2003, 840 people were newly diagnosed with the virus. In Lithuania, the 72 new HIV cases detected in 2001 increased more than five-fold the following year.

- Injecting drug use still accounts for the largest proportion of newly reported infections in these countries but sexual transmission is slowly gaining ground. In Belarus and Moldova, most infections are occurring among young drug injectors and their sexual partners.
- In Moldova, HIV prevalence of almost 5% has been found in street-based sex workers, one in ten of whom also reported a history of injecting drugs.
- HIV prevalence remains very low (less than 0.3%) in most of Central Asia and the Caucasus, though the overall number of registered infections continues to rise—formidably in Uzbekistan, which hosts one of the youngest epidemics in the world. Almost 91% of all reported infections were diagnosed between 2001 and mid-2003, bringing to more than 2500 the total number of reported HIV cases.
- In Kazakhstan, where a total of just over 3600 HIV cases had been reported by mid-2003, sentinel surveillance conducted in 2003 has shown prevalence levels of 3.8% in injecting drug users and 4.6% in sex workers but there are no data concerning men who have sex with men.
- Kyrgyzstan's epidemic is being propelled mainly by injecting drug use. In a country where it is officially estimated that at least 2% of the adult population injects drugs, there is a serious risk of the rapid and extensive spread of HIV.
- In Azerbaijan, one in four street drug injectors in the capital, Baku, have been found to be HIV-positive.
- Because the epidemics in Central Asia and the Caucasus are still in their early stages, they can be halted with prevention strategies that concentrate on reaching those who are currently most at risk of HIV infection.
- Coverage of HIV prevention programming is low across the region: just 10% of sex workers, less than 8% of injecting drug users and only 4% of men who have sex with men are being reached. Only around 11% of people who need antiretroviral drugs are currently being treated, and for HIV-positive drug injectors, treatment access is rare to non-existent in the worst-affected countries.
- International funding for AIDS in Eastern Europe and Central Asia has ballooned; approximately US\$600 million has been made available by multilateral institutions and other donors. Financially a massive expansion of prevention and treatment programmes is now feasible in the region.

For more information, please contact Dominique De Santis, UNAIDS, Geneva, tel. +41 22 791 4509 or mobile (+41 79) 254 6803, or Annemarie Hou, UNAIDS, Geneva, tel. +41 22 791 4577. For more information about UNAIDS, visit www.unaids.org.