

NORTH AMERICA, WESTERN AND CENTRAL EUROPE

Some 64 000 new infections occurred in North America, Western and Central Europe in 2004, raising the number of people living with HIV in these countries to 1.6 million. The number of women living with HIV in 2004 rose to 420 000. Widespread access to life-prolonging antiretroviral treatment kept the number of AIDS deaths at 23 000 in 2004. However, there are ample indications that prevention efforts are not keeping pace with the changing epidemics.

- Sex between men and, to a lesser extent, injecting drug use remain prominent factors in the epidemics in these countries, but the patterns of HIV transmission are changing. New sections of populations are being affected, with an increasing proportion of people becoming infected through unprotected heterosexual intercourse.
- In the United States of America the epidemic has altered demonstrably in the past decade. An estimated 40 000 people have been infected with HIV each year in the United States during the past decade, but the epidemic is now disproportionately lodged among African Americans (over 50% of new HIV diagnoses in recent years have been among African Americans) and is affecting much greater numbers of women (African American women account for up to 72% of new HIV diagnoses in all US women).
- For men overall, and African American men specifically, the vast majority of HIV infections occur during injecting drug use and sex between men where high levels of risk behaviour are still being found. However, heterosexual intercourse accounts for most HIV diagnoses among women, and there are strong indications that the main risk factor for many women acquiring HIV is the often-undisclosed risk behaviour of their male partners.
- After the introduction of antiretroviral therapy in 1995-1996, AIDS-related deaths fell steeply in the United States until the late 1990s and then continued to decline more gradually—from 19 005 reported AIDS deaths in 1998 to 16 371 deaths in 2002. However, the rate of death due to AIDS among African Americans was over twice as high as that among whites in 2002. African Americans now have the poorest survival rates among people diagnosed with AIDS.
- In the 12 Western European countries with data for newly diagnosed HIV infections, HIV diagnoses in people who were infected through heterosexual contact increased by 122% between 1997 and 2002. A large share of those diagnoses are in people originating from countries with serious epidemics, mainly countries in sub-Saharan Africa and, for the United Kingdom, the English-speaking Caribbean.

- HIV diagnoses among men who have sex with men increased by 22% from 2001-2002 in Western Europe, reversing the slow decline seen in the previous years. However, the new data may reflect an increased uptake of testing services. In England, HIV infection is now the fastest-growing serious health condition. In Germany, where greater treatment access had already boosted uptake of testing in the late 1990s, a recent increase in diagnoses (from 642 HIV diagnoses in 2000 to 742 in 2002) likely reflects an actual increase in new infections.
- Given persistently high HIV prevalence among men who have sex with men in western Europe—between 10% and 20% in several countries, and even higher in large cities—there is an urgent need to revitalize and improve safer sex campaigns for men who have sex with men.
- Although injecting drug use accounts for a diminishing share of newly diagnosed HIV infections in most Western European countries, it remains an important factor in several countries' epidemics, among them Italy, Portugal and Spain.
- In Portugal (where the rates of new HIV diagnoses are higher than elsewhere in Europe), injecting drug use still accounted for almost 50% of HIV diagnoses in 2002. HIV prevalence of 20% and higher is still being found among injecting drug users in parts of other countries (including France, Italy and Netherlands).
- There is an increasing trend in the share of HIV infections attributable to heterosexual intercourse in Western Europe—and with it, a rise in the number of women who are being diagnosed with the virus. In the 12 Western European countries for which data are available, the proportion of women among people newly diagnosed with HIV infection increased from 25% in 1997 to 38% in 2002.
- In the countries of central Europe (including Czech Republic and Hungary), numbers of new HIV infections have stayed stable since the late 1990s, with most of the new infections being recorded in Poland. In the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovenia, and the Slovak Republic, sex between men is known to be the predominant mode of HIV transmission.
- Unlike elsewhere in the world, a large majority of people in most countries in this region who need antiretroviral treatment do have access to it. As a result, AIDS deaths have stayed low since plummeting in the mid-to-late 1990s.
- In some countries, a large share of HIV infections remain undiagnosed. In the United Kingdom, for example, an estimated one third of people with HIV do not know their serostatus and are likely to discover it only once afflicted by AIDS-related illnesses. And there is worrying evidence of antiretroviral drug resistance among some newly HIV-infected individuals in Western Europe.

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