

MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

HIV continues to increase its presence in the Middle East and North Africa. Nearly 92 000 people became newly infected with HIV in 2004. HIV is being transmitted along diverse paths in this region, including paid sex, sex between men and injecting drug use, and there exists significant scope for further expansion of the epidemic.

- The total number of people currently living with HIV in the region is 540 000. In 2004, some 250 000 women were living with the virus. AIDS killed an estimated 28 000 people in 2004.
- In most Middle East and North African countries, the epidemics are still in their early stages—which boosts the chances that effective prevention efforts can limit the further spread of the virus.
- Wracked by civil war and humanitarian crises, Sudan remains the region's worst-affected country, with its epidemic concentrated largely in the south. Latest estimates show that more than 2% of the adult population were living with HIV at the end of 2003—some 400 000 people, which amounts to more than 80% of all people with HIV in this region.
- Libya's epidemic has been growing dramatically, with almost 90% of the officially reported 5160 HIV infections among Libyans (at end-2002) having occurred in 2000–2002 alone. The vast majority—over 90%—of reported HIV cases are attributed to injecting drug use.
- Risk behaviour among injecting drug users in the Egyptian capital, Cairo, is high and there is ample opportunity for HIV to spread from drug injectors to their sexual partners. More than half (55%) said they had injected with non-sterile injecting equipment in the previous month. Among the three quarters of the users who were sexually active, almost two thirds had never used a condom.
- HIV infections in Algeria, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman have also been attributed to injecting drug use.
- In Iran, about 15% of all HIV infections since the start of the epidemic were reported in 2003 alone. While this increase partly reflects expanded surveillance, it almost certainly mirrors a recent escalation driven primarily by injecting drug use.
- According to one study, around half of injecting-drug users in Iran were married and one third of the surveyed users reported extra-marital sex, pointing to the potential for further transmission. Such a secondary wave of infections would probably put sex workers (and their other clients) at risk too.
- As elsewhere in the region, sex workers in Iran appear to be poorly equipped to avert HIV infections. One study among sex workers in the Iranian city of Kermanshah, found that almost all the sex workers knew about condoms, but only 50% had ever used one. Both sex workers and clients in Iran have cited high condom prices as the main reason for not using them.

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