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UNAIDS announces reduction in new HIV infections worldwide

Worldwide, new HIV infections may have decreased by 17% in the past eight years, according to findings in a recent [UNAIDS and WHO report](#).

The most dramatic reduction in new infections between 2001 and 2008 was observed in east Asia, where there was a decline of nearly 25%. The reduction was approximately 15% in sub-Saharan Africa. This accounts for about 400,000 fewer infections in that region. A decline of 10% was observed in southeast Asia.

A dramatic increase among injection drug users was observed in eastern Europe, but findings indicate that the epidemic may have leveled off in that area.

Health officials said that the decline in new infections may be the result of HIV prevention programs and the increasing availability of antiretroviral therapy (ART). Specific emphasis was placed on the role of 'modes of transmission' studies in shaping prevention efforts.

Some of these programs, however, still fail to meet targets. UNAIDS authorities said that continued efforts to allocate resources and tailor programs will be necessary to reduce the disease further. It is also necessary for prevention programs to keep pace with the constant rapid evolution of the epidemic.

Data indicate that few HIV prevention programs exist for individuals older than 25, married couples or people in stable relationships, widowers and divorcees. HIV prevalence has been demonstrated to often be higher than expected in these populations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa. For example, in Swaziland, individuals older than 25 accounted for more than two-thirds of adult infections, yet few HIV prevention programs there are designed with that population group in mind.

Funding for HIV prevention is also of concern. The prevalence of the disease in Swaziland is 26%, but prevention programs accounted for just 17% of the total budget for AIDS in the country. The budget for prevention programs in Ghana was cut by 43% between 2005 and 2007.

The report includes some key statistics on the current state of the epidemic:

- 33.4 million [31.1 million–35.8 million] people have HIV worldwide.
- 2.7 million [2.4 million–3.0 million] people were newly infected in 2008.
- 2 million [1.7– 2.4 million] people died of AIDS-related illness in 2008.
- About 200,000 new infections among children have been prevented since 2001.
- AIDS-related deaths have fallen by over 50% in Botswana in the past five years.
- 50,000 maternal deaths were associated with HIV in South Africa in 2008.

The report highlights some ancillary results of improved prevention and treatment efforts. For example, the number of newly-orphaned children has decreased as a result of parents taking medications and living longer.

Other findings in the report indicate that the most successful HIV prevention and treatment programs were ones that were integrated with other health and social welfare services.

Shifts in the epidemic have been observed in eastern Europe and central Asia. Where injection drug users once drove the epidemic in those areas, the sexual partners of users are now becoming infected in increasing numbers. In other parts of Asia, the epidemic may be shifting from sex workers and injection drug users to heterosexual couples.

For individuals who are interested in the HIV/AIDS community, UNAIDS has launched a free social networking site: AIDSspace.org.