

YOUR

Weekender

MAGAZINE

AIDS



- Do the youth really know the risks?
- Do they care or heed advice?
- Are they doing anything to evade the disease?

They are young, energetic and adventurous. They watch movies, listen to music, dress in the latest 'crazy' fashions and generally feel on top of the world.

They are 'warm-blooded' and sexually active. Most of them reach a peak age of sexual activity at the age of 16 although four per cent of them who are sexually active (according to recent statistics) are below age 10. At a mean age of 13, boys have their first sexual experience while the girls have it at age 14.

You will find them in parties, trendy discos puffing cigarettes away, kissing, holding hands, hugging...and you know what else. Most are unaware of the consequences of sexual activity.

But they are part of us with ambitions to fulfil, morals to build, health to nurture and lives to protect. They are either school leavers, in school, university and or in college.

But do they know about the killer disease, Aids? Do they know that it is not only a disease for prostitutes and adults? And do they know they are a vulnerable group?

The reality of HIV prevalence in Kenya is scaring. Estimates show that over 800,000 people are infected by HIV including 35,000 children. Most of these people do not know they are infected.

Over 70 per cent of Aids cases are aged between 15-49.

HIV prevalence rate as estimated by the Kenya National Aids Control Programme, KNACP, shows a rise to over 7.5 per cent (between 7-8 people out of a 100 infected by HIV) by end of last year with the urban prevalence rate estimated at 14-15 per cent from 10-11 per cent in 1992.

Close to 49,000 Aids cases had been reported to KNACP by the end of May, according to Meshack Ndolo, a programme officer in KNACP.

A young HIV-positive Susan Njeri will tell fellow young Kenyans that Aids is real and it is deadly.

Having contracted it when she was 13 and pregnant, Njeri now is a living example of Aids with a face. She found out after falling sick back in 1989. She was then only in Standard Seven.

She says it did not mean much to her because Aids then sounded far-fetched, but with time the effects of the disease have been manifested in diarrhoea, skin disease and other complications.

"I thought I would take my life when the reality dawned on me. But when my mother learnt from the doctor what was wrong, she counselled me and gave me courage and hope."

She has since met other HIV-positive people who have made her outlook to the disease very positive.

"I have come to terms with it



BY
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now and I live knowing my days are numbered," she says.

Her son is alive and well, although she has never had him tested.

But she mourns the indiscriminate manner in which young people involve themselves in sex.

"I see so many of them behaving irresponsibly and even when you tell them about Aids they tend not to believe it," she says.

A chat with Kenya's youth reveals that they know Aids is dangerous but their information is laced with a lot of other misinformation regarding other details.

In fact it is almost clear, by talking to them, that although they know Aids is dangerous, it is not a disease they relate closely to or which they think is a threat to their lives.

It also appears that not much emphasis is being put to make them realise how much of a risk group they are.

And parents, many who think only the other person can get it and not them, are not of much help.

But they are sexually active and in certain cases indiscriminate. For some it is the disease for the adults while for others, the scourge only affects those with multiple spouses.

"You can easily get it if you have many girlfriends," Richard Maghanga, 17, and a student in a private Nairobi school says.

"I think it is hard to avoid it because you can also get it from broken window glass or from using razor blades," adds his colleague, Marcelus Nyaboga.

Another student from Eastleigh Secondary School who says he has seen a young man die of Aids says the young man got it because he was moving with an older woman.

"I think most of us think for one to contract it, they would have to be very unlucky or just an accident," he adds.

He says when young people go to discos or parties, they take drugs or drink a lot of alcohol, after which "they just lose control."

But from the trends in Kenya today and from the way it is spreading like bush fire, one wonders whether the question of

luck, coincidences or accidents arise.

"My boyfriend and I had an HIV test done before we became close," explains a Form Two student in a city private school. She says, the boyfriend, a working class person suggested it and she did not mind having it done.

"Do your parents know that you had it done?"

"Oh no, they don't," she says confidently.

But she is among the few that are sexually active with boyfriends who 'care'.

"I know of many girls who have intimate relationships but who do not seem to know about this disease," one says.

"I do not think they know Aids is a problem," she adds.

Esther Ngina who helps with the fight against the disease at the Kenya Aids Society says young people should listen before it is too late.

A few schools have been "sensitised" about the problem and have invited groups to speak to them about the reality of the disease.

In a girl's school like Eastleigh Secondary School, which has formed an Aids club, the girls seem quite knowledgeable about the problem.

The school administration invited medical students from the University of Nairobi to address students about the disease.

"The discussions generated so much interest that we hope to invite the students to come back to the school," says Christine Mwambua, the deputy headmistress says.

She says by the attention they gave that discussion, the students realised how serious the problem was.

But like many other people who have never seen the human face of Aids, some of the students go by what they see on TV - a skinny, emaciated and wasted person - hence do not expect an HIV/Aids patient to be fat or looking healthy.

"I know the causes of Aids but it is hard to tell who has it," says Barake Abdullah, 15.

"We know that Aids is dangerous but those who get involved in sexual activity think it is natural," says Jane Njoki, a Form Four student in the school.

She and her colleagues know that other young people are sexually active and some of those who go to discos or who take drugs and alcohol just dismiss the disease as any other.

"Boys are more careless than the girls because although they know about the risks, they say preventive measures can be taken," adds Zelpa Omar, 18 in Form Four.

"Some say Aids did not come to catch trees but human beings and that everybody will die anyway," says Alice Wafula, 17 and



Baraka Abdulla, Alice Wafula (inset left) and Rose Tariko (inset right): Aware and worried about the spread of Aids.

Pictures by REBBECCA NDUKU

in Form Three.

Her colleague, Rose Tariko, says some girls are involved with *matatu* touts.

The school system seems appropriate for creating awareness about the dreaded disease.

"We feel susceptible to it and we worry about it because we realise it is here with us," explains Mary Magotsi, the teacher in charge of the Aids club in the school.

No doubt through such a club, young people can directly benefit and realise the seriousness of the disease.

Already a number of NGO's have taken keen interest in Aids control and the Kenya National Aids Control Programme through the Kenya Institute of Education has integrated sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)

and Aids into primary school to curriculum to help "sensitise" young people about the disease.

But perhaps the most effective approach has been the use of HIV-positive people to talk about the problem.

The Kenya Aids Society has such an approach and has addressed schools and colleges countrywide.

"This approach works very well because after the shock of meeting a HIV-infected person they realise that Aids is real," says an official of the organisation.

He says their experience has been rewarding because the talks generate a lot of interest but also reveal a lot of ignorance and misinformation about the disease.

But what is the parents' role in all this? Do they believe in the disease themselves?

Not exactly and while some

still shy off from talk on sexuality and sexual activity, young people are increasingly becoming risk groups. Even those who talk about sexuality, the issue of Aids still remains foreign to them.

"Parents need to talk about Aids constantly," says Christine Mwangi, a mother of three teenagers.

"It is no longer the fear of girls getting pregnant. We are now talking about death and young people need to know what is before them," she adds.

Christine who says she has found it difficult to talk about Aids to her two daughters and a son, says "it only works because we have always talked even when they were young."

She has brought home videos on Aids and watched with her children, who she says took it well.

You too can do the same.