

WORLD AIDS DAY

Safe sex among the youth reduces their risk of Aids as married couples hard hit

Emergence of street vendors selling condoms helps reduce infections

By DANIEL OKANGA
and CAROLYNE AGOSA

It is Friday evening. Loud music is blaring from a bar in downtown Nairobi. Drinks are flowing freely and the hormones of the youth on the dance floor are raging. Clearly the crowd is having a good time.

Just outside the bar sits Mr Tom Shikuku, a street trader. Besides selling sweets, biscuits and other assorted items, Mr Shikuku recently added packets of condoms to his stock.

"I never used to sell condoms until in February last year, when some young men started asking for them," he says. "They would pretend they wanted sweets but then later ask if I had condoms as well."

Mr Shikuku is just one of the many

100m

Number of condoms used in Kenya every year, according to statistics

street vendors in Nairobi who sell condoms at night. Young revelers prefer being the condoms from them because many are too shy to buy the condoms directly from supermarkets or bar counters.

"These guys have really helped us. Some of us go dancing all the night without condoms in our pockets because when you come to party, you don't expect to make a kill (meet a girl to have sex with)," says Peter, a third year student at the University of Nairobi.

Peter says he'd rather buy condoms from a street vendor than order them from a bartender.

"I fear ordering condoms from a bartender because I always fear everybody in the bar is watching me. But it is easier to buy them from the street vendor because

no one apart from the trader is seeing me," he says.

Young men and women in Nairobi and other towns seem to have heeded the message of using a condom during sex. This is reflected in this year's Kenya Aids Indicator Survey which shows more Kenyans are using condoms.

The National Aids Control Council estimates that over 100 million condoms are used in Kenya every day, with youths constituting the highest percentage of condom users.

Aids experts say this could be the most likely explanation for why HIV prevalence among the youth is slowing down, while increasing at alarming rate among mar-

Mr Richard Odhiambo and his bride, Mrs Evelyn Namava, during their wedding at the St Francis Of Assisi Catholic Church in Limuru yesterday. The HIV-positive couple celebrated their wedding a day before the World Aids Day to be marked today.
Photo/PETERSON GITHAIGA

ried couples and the elderly, who were previously thought to be at low risk of HIV infection.

Dr Willis Akhwale, Head of disease prevention and control at the Ministry of Health, says this revelation about the changing patterns of HIV infection calls for a new strategy. "It is crucial that we come up with policies that focus on specific issues if we have to win the war against HIV/Aids," he says.

And Mr Richard Cheserek, the Uasin Gishu District Aids and STI Coordinator, said that the reason for the drop in HIV prevalence among the youth was that unlike some adults, youths are more likely to insist on using condoms during sex.

"The married people tend not to use condoms quite often because they fear their partners will think they are having extra marital affairs. Also, older men or women who have sex with the young tend to think they (the youths) are safe," says Mr Cheserek.

Statistics show that HIV prevalence is lower among the youth in age group 15-24 and higher among Kenyans of age group 30-34 who are married or cohabiting.

The latest survey also shows that two-thirds of Kenyan adults infected with HIV are legally married or cohabiting and that in one of every 10 marital unions, at least one partner is living with HIV, forming what health experts call discordant couples.

World Health Organisation's country director David Okello says the high rate of HIV infection among the elderly may be a reflection of the sexual pattern which mixes age groups.

"We have older men going out with younger girls and back to partners of their ages," Dr Okello told the Daily Nation.

The figures could also mean that the elderly people were infected earlier and have only grown older. This revelation has forced the government and other organisations dealing with Aids to design new approaches to curb the spread of the disease among the married and the elderly.

One strategy was last week's launch of a new voluntary male circumcision programme which will offer free counseling for couples on the benefits of male circumcision. The Government has also pledged to involve more women in the drive to increase the awareness of Kenyan men who undergo circumcision.

The programme is underway in Nyanza Province among the Luo, who traditionally don't practice male circumcision.

Accepting fact

Government officials are slowly accepting the fact that the ABC strategy of preventing new infections ("Abstinence, Be Faithful, use Condoms") does not reach a broad enough spectrum of those who may be vulnerable.

"There have been no focused interventions for HIV among the elderly," Dr Okello told the Daily Nation. "The Government needs to advocate for policies and strategies for the elderly - including specific health-care programmes such as social security, social protection and life skills."

Plans to boost kitty approved

By AMINA KIBIRIGE

MPs have resolved to increase the amount of money that the Constituency Aids Control Council gets to fight Aids.

During a weekend meeting in Mombasa, the MPs said that the move would ensure more people at the grassroots benefited from Aids drugs. It would also ensure that the money is better managed.

The money will now be channeled from the District Technical Committee to the Constituency Aids Control Council.

The move would see constituency committees receive 80 per cent of the Sh1.2 billion set aside for the Aids campaign. This will be an increase from the 70 per cent the committees receive. However, the district technical committees' share will be halved from 20 to 10 per cent of the Sh1.2 billion. The remaining 10 per cent goes to the national office.

New strategy needed to halt scourge

As Kenya today joins the rest of the world in marking World Aids Day, the Government and other organisations dealing with HIV are devising new strategies to combat HIV/Aids.

Specifically, they want to encourage as many Kenyans as possible to learn their HIV status. Despite substantial efforts to expand access to voluntary HIV testing, nearly 80 per cent of HIV-infected adults in Kenya are unaware of their status, and more than 90 per cent do not know whether their partners are infected, according to World Health Organisation. The latest campaign is designed to get at least 51 per cent of Kenyans tested for their HIV by next year.

One of the strategies is the national door-to-door VCT campaign which was launched on Monday last week. This is a one-week campaign that will coincide with the World Aids Day, to be marked today.

ACCORDING TO THE National Aids Control Council's Peter Mutie, the campaign targets 1.5 million Kenyans. Liverpool VCT, an organisation dealing with HIV/Aids, has also launched a pilot project on universal HIV testing, based on a World Health Organisation study which shows that universal testing for HIV, followed by immediate treatment, could reduce the number of people developing full-blown Aids by up to 95

per cent. The World Health Organisation also found that such a strategy could virtually eliminate HIV transmission. According to WHO's country director, Dr David Okello, the study used computer modeling to project what would happen if everyone over 15 was tested every year.

"Say if you tested somebody and find he or she is HIV positive and you immediately put the person on treatment, you will reduce the burden of HIV by 90 per cent and within 10 years, the prevalence will drop to 1 (one) per cent," Dr Okello said. However, universal testing may not be realistic in Kenya.

HIV-positive couple tie knot

By PETERSON GITHAIGA

Over 80 per cent of Kenyans who are living with HIV/Aids are not aware of their status, Public Health and Sanitation minister Beth Mugo said yesterday.

She spoke during the wedding of a HIV-positive couple at the St Francis Of Assisi Catholic Church in Limuru.

Mrs Mugo said that stigma makes it difficult for couples to seek HIV tests, disclose their status and negotiate prevention behaviour.

"Richard and Evelyn have today demonstrated one way of overcoming this stigma and discrimination by coming out openly," said Mrs Mugo. "They have also showed us that despite having HIV one can leave a normal life."

The wedding was attended by Hundreds of people.

Said the groom, Mr Richard Odhiambo: "We decided to have our wedding today ahead of the World Aids Day as a commemoration of those who had earlier died of this disease."

Mr Odhiambo decided to go public about his status in 2002 after his first wife died of Aids.

He later vowed to educate people about the scourge before he met Evelyn.

Mrs Mugo said that it was unfortunate that out of 1.4 million people living with the disease, more than 1 million were yet to be tested.

According to her, stigma remained the single most important barrier to public action against HIV and it was the main reason why too many people were afraid to go to voluntary counselling and testing centres.

Devastate society

"Stigma is the chief reason why aids epidemic continues to devastate societies around the world," she said.

Her ministry was working with other organisations to educate people and empower them to challenge the discrimination and denial of the disease, said Mrs Mugo.

The World Aids Day will be celebrated today.