While one’s becoming aware of HIV through media is a useful and desirable first step, interpersonal communication is vital for understanding the nature of the illness. Such education is woefully lacking in the state, with nine out of ten residents having had no such counselling, according to the Behavioural Surveillance Survey (BSS) 2001.

People Need HIV/AIDS Information

For people to take steps to avoid HIV/AIDS, they must first hear of it. In Tamil Nadu, 89 percent of adults have heard of the disease. In the rural areas, however, 16 percent of women are unaware of its existence. For those who have heard of the disease, television accounted for most of that knowledge, followed by radio and friends or relatives. Only 3.4 percent of over-married women had heard of the disease from a health worker.

A majority felt it was possible to be tested confidentially for the disease from a health worker. Testing for HIV is not only in the individual’s own self-interest, but would act as a strong first step, interpersonal communication is vital for understanding the nature of the illness. Such education is woefully lacking in the state, with nine out of ten residents having had no such counselling, according to the Behavioural Surveillance Survey (BSS) 2001.

The BSS also revealed that awareness of the use of the condom as a means to prevent HIV/AIDS was far from universal. In the rural areas, about 30 percent of men and 60 percent of women were not aware of its role in disease prevention.

Personal experience with the disease is becoming more widespread. Overall, 18.4 percent of BSS respondents know of someone who had died of AIDS, 19.4 percent of BSS respondents knew of a friend or relative who had died of AIDS. This is the way HIV/AIDS spread in Africa.

This series of factsheets on the six hard-hit HIV/AIDS states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Manipur, Nagaland and Tamil Nadu) are available in English and the respective state language and are free of charge to individuals and organisations. For additional copies, please contact the Population Foundation of India at the address below.

Factsheet prepared by:
Population Foundation of India
B-28, Qutab Institutional Area, Tara Crescent, New Delhi 110 016
Tel.: 11-4126-7300 Fax: 11-4126-7346 e-mail: popfound@sify.com
www.popfound.org

End
Population Reference Bureau
1875 Connecticut Ave., NW, Suite 520, Washington, DC 20009
Tel.: (202) 483-1100 Fax: (202) 337-3937 e-mail: popref@prb.org
www.prb.org

Funding was provided through the generosity of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Printed in India at Ajanta Offset & Packagings Ltd., Delhi, November 2003.

What must be done?

- The stigma associated with people living with HIV/AIDS must be ended. Women and orphans are cast from families, children from their school and workers from their workplace. Ignorance breeds needless fear.
- Confidential testing centres must be made operational in every district. HIV/AIDS must be fought at the grass-roots level.
- Women are a vital target for information and testing, lest they be left defenseless.
- HIV/AIDS information — and counseling — must be universal. Everyone should know the truth about HIV/AIDS.
- People must learn that a single, uninfected partner is the best defence.
- Those who do engage in risky behaviour must learn the value of a high quality condom and how to obtain one.
- Treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS, including antiretroviral drugs, should be provided free of charge, given that the expense is beyond the reach of many.
- The importance of quickly educating youth is a key element in the campaign.

All the danger signs are there. Knowledge of the disease itself is low, the knowledge of preventive measures is far short of what is necessary and counselling is unavailable to many. HIV/AIDS has come to Tamil Nadu and is now a genuine epidemic.
High rates of HIV infection among women in antenatal clinics indicates that the disease is being carried to the general population by a “bridge” group. It is unlikely that these women contracted HIV through their own behaviour, but through that of their husbands.

Among these women, the high rates of infection for those with little or no education show the difficulty of reaching these groups with AIDS information.

Tragically, pregnant women can pass the infection to their unborn child or, after birth, by breastfeeding, an otherwise recommended practice.

“The bridge” groups, such as husbands who use the services of sex workers, infect their wives with HIV who then pass the disease to their babies. The epidemic is complete.

HIV Movues through Society

The occupation of STD patients who tested positive for HIV illustrates how the disease spreads, especially in the initial stages. These patients often have contact with many others. These patients or clients are more likely to contract the disease and then spread it to others.

Workers in the hotel and tourism industry have the highest prevalence of the STD groups tested in Tamil Nadu. Truck drivers are the second group. Drivers often travel to many different locations, bringing the disease with them, often to areas where the disease has not yet begun. The unemployed form the third largest group in HIV infection with 12.5 percent in Tamil Nadu. This group is often without work for some time after migrating to larger towns and cities and becomes vulnerable to HIV.

A telling statistic is the high prevalence of HIV discovered among housewives at 11.4 percent. This high rate of infection is another signal of the general expansion of HIV.

Condom Use Short of Goal

The best defence against HIV is a single, uninfected partner. When one’s behaviour is risky, the primary defence is a high fidelity to a single, uninfected partner. When one’s behaviour is risky, the primary defence is a steady, monogamous relationship. Unfortunately, monogamy is not enough. Both women and men who have children with multiple sexual partners are at high risk of acquiring HIV.

The best defence against AIDS is a single, uninfected partner. When one’s behaviour is risky, the primary defence is a steady, monogamous relationship. Unfortunately, monogamy is not enough. Both women and men who have children with multiple sexual partners are at high risk of acquiring HIV.

Only 100 percent use of the condom with commercial sex workers can prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS. Tamil Nadu is far short of the goal.