

13

WOMEN AND HIV

Key points:

1. Women are more vulnerable to HIV infection than men.
2. If you have been raped, PEP reduces the chance of being infected with HIV.
3. HIV positive women need to have a Pap smear every year to prevent cervical cancer.

In South Africa, women are 4 times more likely to be infected with HIV than men. Women are not only at an increased risk of being infected with HIV, but they are also more likely to carry the burden of caring for family and friends with AIDS. Women are particularly vulnerable to HIV infection because of their economic dependence on men, poverty and sexual abuse and lack of access to education. Studies have shown that HIV infection rates among adolescent girls

are on average 5 times higher than boys. Women are also biologically more vulnerable to HIV infection. In societies with gender inequality, women are unlikely to be able to negotiate condom use. For all these reasons, women need to be empowered to avoid being infected with HIV. But this is not only about women, men and women need to work together to bring about change.





ABOUT THIS CHAPTER

The aim of this chapter is to raise awareness of all the social and biological reasons that make women more vulnerable to HIV infection.

This chapter includes:

- Why women are vulnerable to HIV
- Rape
- Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)
- Women and HPV



Welcome to Chapter 13 of the Health Literacy Manual. In this chapter we are going to be talking about women and HIV. We will be looking at why women are particularly vulnerable to HIV, as well as what women can do to avoid being infected with HIV. We will learn about post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) that can help prevent HIV infection in women who are raped. We will also discuss women's health and the human papillomavirus (HPV).

Why women are vulnerable to HIV

(Episode 13, Chapter 1)



Globally, women represent 70% of people living in poverty, are less educated than men, work longer hours than men, and live shorter lives. In South Africa, there are more women living with HIV than men.

What puts women more at risk of contracting HIV than men? A number of things make women more vulnerable to HIV. Some of these things we can do something about and others are beyond our control. It's important to understand what puts women at risk so that we can talk about these things and make decisions that can help make sure that our daughters and future generations of women have a better chance of protecting themselves from HIV infection.

ECONOMIC DEPENDENCE AND POVERTY

Poverty is one factor that makes women more vulnerable to HIV infection than men. This is because poor women are more likely to be uneducated, unemployed and not own land. Being dependent on men for food and basic needs puts women at an increased risk of HIV infection because they cannot negotiate condom use and are more likely to have sex in exchange for food and other goods. When you have sex in exchange for things, it is called transactional sex. We talked about transactional sex in the chapter on HIV prevention. When women have more financial power and more confidence, they are in a much stronger position to negotiate safer sex. They can stand up to men when they need to, either individually or together in the community.

There are now projects and collectives where women come together to learn skills so that they can make their own money and feed themselves and their families. Many families in South Africa are female headed households. This means that there is no man in the home or that the father might be working far away. The migrant labour system in South Africa is responsible for dividing families and also increasing the risk of HIV infection for both men and women. Men are more likely to have sex with other women when they are away from their wife or partner for a long time. Women are also more likely to have sex with other men if their partner is away for a long time, because they may need food and other necessities, as well as comfort.

LIMITED ACCESS TO EDUCATION

A study has shown that girls who complete primary education are more than twice as likely to use condoms. Girls who finish secondary education are between 4 and 7 times more likely to use condoms and also have a smaller chance of being infected with HIV. This increase in condom use has been explained by the fact that they are more educated. Education helps young women have a better chance of being employed and economically independent. Being economically independent means that they do not need to get married young or do not need to rely on a husband for food and care. Education is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of HIV infection for women.



Women are more vulnerable to HIV infection than men.



Education is one of the best ways to reduce the risk of HIV infection in women.



Girls who are better educated are more likely to use condoms.

Girls who finish secondary education are between 4 and 7 times more likely to use condoms and also have a smaller chance of being infected with HIV

BIOLOGICAL FACTORS

When we talk about biological factors that put women at increased risk of HIV infection we are talking about the way that women's bodies are made. There are many differences between a man's body and a woman's body. We learnt about these differences in Chapter 2 on understanding the human body. These differences mean that when a man and a woman have sex, the risk of HIV infection is different for men and women.

Biologically, women are at least twice as likely as men to be infected by HIV during unprotected sex. Firstly, the viral load in semen is higher than the viral load in vaginal fluid. This means that semen carries more HIV or a higher concentration of HIV than the fluid found in a woman's vagina.

Another difference is that women receive the semen into their bodies and so are exposed to HIV for longer and a bigger area is exposed to HIV. The lining of the vagina and womb are vulnerable to HIV transmission because they are only protected by a mucous membrane, which is a thin skin that HIV can easily enter. Unlike the skin on our bodies which is thick and where there needs to be a cut for HIV to enter, the membrane in the vagina is thin and delicate and HIV can enter without any cuts. But as we know, if you have an STI that gives you sores/cuts then your chances of getting HIV are much, much higher. The practice of dry sex (when women make their vagina dry before sex) also puts women at increased risk of HIV infection, because dry sex makes rips and tears in the vagina and HIV can enter much more easily.

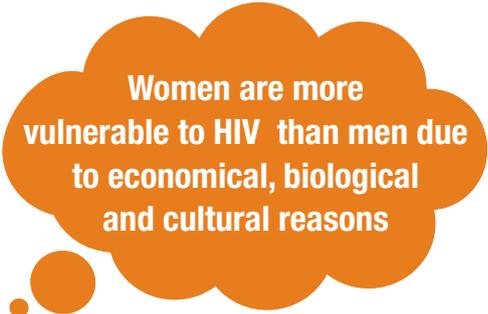
CULTURAL FACTORS

We have spoken about gender equality in Chapter 10 on sexuality. In some cultures women are more equal than in other cultures. Often gender equality is also helped by women being economically independent and being better educated. As we have learnt, when women are financially dependent on men they have very little power when it comes to their sexual and reproductive health. In many cultures, marriage is believed to give the husband the right to make all decisions for his wife, including all decisions about sex, because she is seen as his property.

Many societies are also male dominated, which means that men have more status and power than women. It is difficult to talk about culture and how some cultural practices put women at risk of HIV infection. As we are living in a world with HIV and AIDS, it is time to rethink some of our cultural attitudes and practices. It is important that cultures change with the times and look after their people, rather than putting them at risk.

BELIEFS

Some people have certain beliefs that put women at increased risk of HIV infection. For example, some women have been told that sex is a gift for men. Some societies and cultures also have the idea that women are not supposed to enjoy sex. There is also sometimes peer pressure on young women to have children to prove their fertility. Some churches forbid the use of condoms. All these things combine to put women at risk of being infected by HIV.



Women are more vulnerable to HIV than men due to economical, biological and cultural reasons

GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Gender-based violence is a big problem in South Africa. Violence and forced sex are common in sexual relationships in South Africa. Studies have recorded that for 40% of young women, their first sexual experience was forced. Even with long-term partners, as many as 70% of women report that despite refusing to have sex, they were forced to have sex by being overpowered with physical strength, abuse or threats. Studies in several African countries have shown that the risk of HIV infection among women who have experienced gender based violence can be as much as 3 times higher than women who have not been abused.

Summary of things that put women at risk:

- Poverty
- Economic dependence on men
- Lack of access to education
- Gender inequality
- Gender based violence
- Biological reasons
- Cultural norms and rules
- Beliefs



Very few women report forced sex because they do not see it as rape or gender-based violence.



DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

1. What things make women particularly vulnerable to HIV?

Many things work together to make women vulnerable to HIV. These include poverty, economic dependence on men, lack of access to education, gender inequality, gender-based violence, biological reasons, cultural norms and rules, and other beliefs.

2. How can women's financial independence help to change things?

If women are financially independent, they are able to enter into more equal relationships where they are more empowered to negotiate condom use.

3. How does lack of education make women vulnerable to HIV?

If women are uneducated then they are more likely to be unemployed and have fewer ways of being financially independent of men.



WORKBOOK NOTES

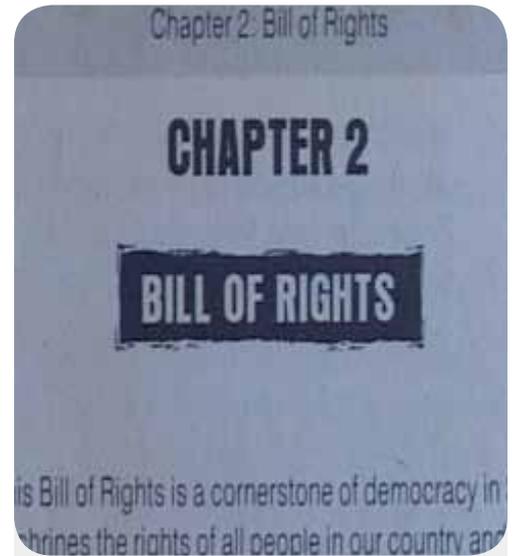
Rape

Episode 13, Chapter 2



South Africa has the world's highest rate of rape. This means that more people are raped in South Africa than any other country in the world. Rape can happen to women, men, girls and boys. In South Africa, women and girls are worst affected by rape. There is sometimes confusion about what rape is. This is one of the reasons why it is not always reported. Rape is any forced or coerced (unwilling) genital contact, or sexual penetration of the vagina, anus or mouth. Many South Africans do not see forced sex as rape. If you want to know more about the law and rape, read Chapter 19 on Human Rights and HIV. In South Africa, we have the Sexual Offences Bill which helps protect us from any sexual abuse, including rape.

People often think of rape as being committed by a stranger. In fact, most rapists are known to the victim and are often their friends or family. Some estimate that half of all South African women will be raped during their lives. Many rapes will go unreported, especially if they happen in the family. It is important to understand that rape is about violence, humiliation and control. Rape often has very little to do with sex. People who rape do so because they want to have violent control over the person they rape. Poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence add to the problem.



*The Bill of Rights protects our rights.
The Sexual Offences Bill protects us from sexual abuse.*

DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

- 1. Why is rape not always reported?**
Rape is often not reported because people don't think of forced sex as rape and are often confused about what rape is.
- 2. What is rape?**
Rape is any forced or coerced genital contact, or sexual penetration of the vagina, the anus or mouth.
- 3. Are most rapists strangers to the victim?**
No, most rapists are known by the person they rape.
- 4. What percentage of South African women are expected to be raped during their lifetime?**
Some people estimate that half of all South African women will be raped in their lifetime.



What to do if you have been raped

If you have been raped, tell someone who will support you. You might want to tell a friend or family member or someone else you feel you can trust. It is not your fault that you have been raped. If you have been raped, and you wish to report the crime to the police, or to lay a charge, you should try to avoid washing as it allows doctors to collect evidence from your body, which could help convict the rapist.

You have the right to confidentiality and respect. Quickly contact your nearest clinic, police station or a related organisation like Rape Crisis. You do not have to report to the police first. If you do report rape to the police, they are obliged to take you to the nearest clinic. The most important thing is that you go somewhere safe where you can access health care, legal assistance and counselling.

If you have been raped and you wish to report the rape to the police, that is a good thing. As rape is a very traumatic experience you may not feel strong enough to report the rape to the police. However it is important to remember that reporting rape may help prevent someone else from being raped in the future.

Of course, many women will be worried if they get raped that they may have been infected with HIV. What do we do in such a situation? Let's read on.



If you have been raped, go to your nearest clinic, police station or rape victim support organisation.



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DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

1. Who should you contact if you have been raped?
Rape is often not reported because people don't think of forced sex as rape and are often confused about what rape is.

2. What must you try to do so that the police can collect evidence if you wish to make a case?
You should try to not wash and you should go to a doctor straight away so that you can be examined and your clothes can be kept as evidence for a case. For example, there might be semen on your body or on your clothes.

3. What rights do you have?
You have the right to confidentiality and respect. This includes when accessing support and reporting a rape to the police.

Post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)

Episode 13, Chapter 4



Post-exposure prophylaxis or PEP helps reduce the chance of getting HIV when you are raped. It is also used when health care workers have a needle-stick injury or where they are exposed to blood in the clinic or hospital. PEP is a strong dose of ARVs that fights any HIV that might be in your body. The sooner you take PEP after being exposed to HIV, the better chance you have of not being infected with HIV. This is because you get the ARVs into your system before HIV has had a chance to start multiplying.

Even if you do not report the rape, you still have the right to go to your clinic and get medicines to stop you getting infected with HIV or other STIs, and to prevent pregnancy. By law you do not have to report a rape to the police to get PEP. It can be very difficult for women to deal with rape. There are also rape crisis clinics where you can give a statement while getting the medical care that you need.

With PEP you have a good chance of avoiding HIV infection if you have been raped. The most commonly used drug for PEP is Combivir, although other drugs such as Kaletra may be given instead. For PEP to work, try to get it within 72 hours of being raped. Speak to a health care worker or doctor if you are unsure or have any questions.

You will need to be tested for HIV before receiving PEP. This is to check if you are already HIV positive, before being raped. If you test HIV positive, then you will not be given PEP as you will be starting ARVs in the future. If you test HIV negative, then you will be given PEP.

If you have been raped, you should be given:

- An HIV test to see if you already have HIV
- If you are HIV negative, then PEP will be given to help prevent HIV infection
- Antibiotics to stop other STIs
- The 'morning-after pill' to stop pregnancy
- Counselling
- Legal advice

Remember, no matter what some men may say, it is never your fault if you are raped. Women's vulnerability to HIV has a lot to do with the behaviour of men. This means we have to think about ways in which men can learn to respect women more, and to change their behaviour. This is no simple matter, we are talking about major cultural change. But it is possible!



DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

1. What is post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP)?

PEP is a course of antiretrovirals that help prevent the transmission of HIV to people who have been raped or been exposed to blood in a clinic or hospital.

2. Are we entitled to receive PEP even if we do not report the rape?

Yes, you have the right to access PEP even if you do not report the case.

3. What should PEP include?

PEP should include antiretrovirals to prevent HIV infection, antibiotics to prevent STIs, the morning-after pill to prevent pregnancy and also counselling and legal advice. An HIV test must be taken before being given PEP to check for existing HIV infection before the rape took place.



PEP should include emergency contraception often called the 'morning-after pill'.

PEP must be accessed within 72 hours to prevent HIV infection



Here we see the female reproductive system.

CERVICAL CANCER

Other kinds of HPV can cause cancer. The types of HPV that cause warts are not the same as the kinds that cause cancer. The most common kind of cancer that HPV causes is cervical cancer. Over 90% of all cases of cervical cancer are linked to earlier HPV infection. Cervical cancer is the second most common cancer among women worldwide and the most common cancer among women in poor countries. Any women can develop cervical cancer as a result of HPV, but if your immune system is weak, like when you are HIV positive, it is much more likely to occur.

Fortunately, cervical cancer is a type of cancer that can be prevented. Cervical cancer can be prevented by checking for HPV infection and any lesions (cuts) in the cervix. To check for lesions or cuts in the cervix caused by the virus, we need to do a Pap smear.

A Pap smear is also called a cervical cytology smear, which means that it looks at the cells taken from the cervix to check for cancer.

Cervical cancer does not have symptoms until it is quite advanced. This is why it is important to get screened regularly for cervical cancer by going for a Pap smear.

This is especially important for women living with HIV.

Currently South African government policy is to provide women with 1 pap smear every 10 years. In our public hospitals and clinics, a woman is entitled to 3 free Pap smears. It is recommended that a woman has a Pap smear at 30 years of age, 40 and 50. Women with any gynaecological complaints that require a Pap smear should have it as part of the routine gynaecological examination. For women living with HIV, it is recommended that Pap smears are performed at least once a year.

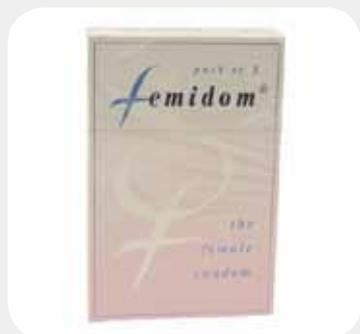
If the Pap smear is positive a simple procedure will remove the lesion. After having a lesion removed, the woman should have a Pap smear every year.

It is important to find any abnormalities or things that suggest you might have cancer early. If you are diagnosed early, it is easier to make sure that you are treated and you can take steps to help prevent cancer. If you are diagnosed with cervical cancer, you can be treated with chemotherapy, surgery or radiation.

A vaccine for HPV is available in South Africa, but is not provided free as part of the state immunisation programme. The vaccine can be accessed through private medical care for about R2000 and it is best if given to girls before they are sexually active.

Ways to help avoid HPV and cervical cancer:

1. Don't smoke cigarettes or stop smoking if you have started. There is evidence that women who smoke are more susceptible to cervical cancer than women who do not smoke.
2. Use condoms or female condoms during intercourse to prevent the spread of the HPV and other sexually transmitted diseases.
3. Postpone sexual activity to an older age.
4. Get diagnosed and treated early for sexually transmitted infections. Always finish taking your full course of medication.
5. Consider getting the vaccine for HPV – especially for young girls before they are sexually active.



HIV positive women should have a pap smear once a year

Using male or female condoms helps to prevent HPV, as well as HIV and other STIs.

DISCUSSION POINTS

In a group talk about the following questions and see if you can answer them.

1. What does a Pap smear do?

A Pap smear checks to see if you have cervical cancer by looking at the cells in the cervix.

2. How often should HIV positive women have a Pap smear?

HIV positive women should have a Pap smear at least every year.

3. Why do HIV positive women need to be more regularly tested?

HIV positive women need to be tested more regularly for cervical cancer because their immune systems are weaker and there is a higher chance of them developing cervical cancer.



WORKBOOK NOTES

TEENAGE PREGNANCY

Some teenagers may not fully understand that having sex can lead to having a baby. Becoming a parent at such a young age has serious consequences which will change their lives. A young woman who becomes pregnant may be forced to drop out of school to support her child. This is because you can't bring a baby to class, and having a child is very, very expensive. You will need to buy many supplies such as nappies and food, as well as possibly paying for someone to look after your baby when you are at school or working. Babies need to go the clinic often for check-ups and to get vaccinations, and they can get sick easily. This places a large financial burden on the young mother and her family. It also means that many young mothers never finish school or study further which means their chances of getting good jobs are less. Not having a good education can have serious financial implications for the young woman and her child and make it more likely that she will end up living in poverty or with a low income. If you do become pregnant while in school, it is important to finish high school. This may mean getting support from family or friends in looking after your baby while you are at school, or getting financial support to send your child to a day care crèche. If you do not finish high school, you are likely to earn less money, which makes it even more difficult to deal with the extra expenses of having a child.

It is important for young people to not rush into sex. You must only start having sex when you are ready to, and when you properly understand how to protect yourself against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. When you do start having sex, you must use a condom every time. There are also other ways to have fun sexually without sexual penetration. This can include petting or stroking, oral sex and thigh, or dry sex with your clothes on. We need to encourage girls and boys and young women and men to act responsibly. To do this we need to educate girls and boys about sex, unplanned pregnancy, HIV and other STIs. Having unprotected sex at an early age also puts young girls at an increased risk of HPV and lead to cervical cancer. If you become pregnant, you can decide to terminate the pregnancy if you feel that you can't properly raise a child. This is an important and difficult decision to make, but it is your decision.



Using condoms is an effective way to prevent unwanted pregnancy.



Becoming pregnant at a young age places an additional burden on your family.



MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTIONS

Name :

Circle the correct answer for each question. You can only choose 1 answer for each question.

1. Which of the following reasons puts women at risk of HIV infection?

- a) Women have more sex than men.
- b) Women are carriers of disease.
- c) Women are often financially dependent on men.
- d) Women don't want to work.

2. Which of the following statements is true?

- a) Men are more likely to be infected with HIV than women
- b) Women are more likely to be infected with HIV than men
- c) Men and women are at equal risk of HIV
- d) More men live in poverty than women

3. Women are more at risk of HIV than men because of:

- a) Social and cultural reasons
- b) Biological reasons
- c) More women live in poverty than men
- d) All of the above

4. Which of the following statements is true?

- a) Rape only happens between strangers.
- b) Rape can only happen to a woman.
- c) Women who wear short skirts deserve to get raped.
- d) Most rapists are known to the person and are often family or friends.

5. PEP is given to women when:

- a) They give birth.
- b) They have unprotected sex.
- c) They have been raped.
- d) They don't use a condom.

6. If you have been raped:

- a) You have to report the case if you want to get PEP.
- b) You should try and see a doctor before you wash or change your clothes.
- c) You are to blame for what happened.
- d) You should wash yourself immediately.

7. When you have been raped, you should get all of the following, except one.

- a) PEP
- b) Morning-after pill
- c) Vitamins
- d) Antibiotics

8. HIV positive women are at increased risk of cervical cancer because:

- a) Their immune system is weaker.
- b) They have a lot of unprotected sex.
- c) They don't always use condoms.
- d) They need to take ARVs.

9. HIV positive women should:

- a) Never have a Pap smear.
- b) Have a Pap smear 3 times in their lifetime.
- c) Have a Pap smear every year.
- d) Have a Pap smear every 10 years.

10. You can help to prevent HPV through:

- a) Always using condoms when you have sex
- b) Delay having sex until you are older
- c) Being vaccinated against HPV
- d) All of the above



WORKBOOK NOTES

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