

(this article appeared in the Times of Swaziland, May 6, 2010; see <http://www.times.co.sz/index.php?news=16332> for the online version)

Series title: HIV from Blood and Punctures

Article title: Knowledge Is Key to Prevention

Since the beginning of the HIV epidemic, it has been clear that HIV spreads most easily through blood contact. In the last 8 years, growing evidence indicates that blood-borne transmission of HIV is significant in Swaziland and throughout Africa.

In rich countries, HIV prevention includes an emphasis on stopping spread from blood contact in healthcare, cosmetic care, and other contexts. Education is an important part of these efforts. For instance, in much of the USA, primary school children are taught about how HIV can spread through blood contact and contaminated sharp instruments.

The United Nations (UN) provides its employees in sub-Saharan Africa with sterile needles and syringes for healthcare and urges them to seek medical care only at special UN clinics that ensure safe practices. These clinics are generally reserved just for UN employees. Furthermore, travelers from rich countries are routinely warned to avoid healthcare involving punctures in poor countries.

However, for decades, HIV prevention programmes in southern Africa have withheld information from the public about how HIV can be spread by many different types of blood contact.

If people don't know how a disease is spread, they can't take steps to avoid catching it or passing it on. The evidence from Swaziland and across Africa suggests this is so for HIV. People who live in countries where few are infected with HIV tend to know that HIV can be spread by contaminated sharp instruments. However, people who live in countries where many are infected, such as Swaziland, tend to be unaware that HIV spreads in this way. For example, in the 2006-2007 Swaziland Demographic and Health Survey, only 9% of those interviewed said that "avoid sharing razors or blades" is a way to prevent getting HIV. In African countries where few people are infected with HIV, almost half of respondents mention this prevention strategy (see the first graph).

[put graphic 1 about here]

Moreover, Swazis who said "avoid sharing razors or blades" as a way to prevent HIV were much less likely to be infected than Swazis who didn't mention this strategy (see the second graph). This difference can't be explained by other factors linked to HIV infection. People who know about a way to prevent HIV probably are more likely to use it.

[put graphic 2 about here]

Although prevention programmes in southern Africa haven't focused on blood-borne HIV risks, prevention programmes in west, central, and east Africa have. This might be part of the reason why HIV rates are so much lower there than in southern Africa.

In a series of articles over the next several months, we will cover practical ways to avoid risks for HIV from blood contact and punctures. In the meantime, you can find more information related to this article and ask us questions about how HIV spreads at www.hivrisk.info.

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Captions:

Graphic 1. In African countries with the worst HIV epidemics, few people know that HIV can spread by re-using sharp instruments such as razor blades. (Demographic and Health Survey data for women; from left to right, the countries are: Swaziland, Kenya, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Mali, Cote d'Ivoire, Guinea, Niger, Cameroon, Malawi, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Senegal).

Graphic 2. In the 2006-2007 Swaziland Demographic and Health Survey, women who said “avoid sharing razors/blades” as a way to prevent HIV were much less likely to be infected than others. (Results were similar for men).

[box to appear near the beginning of the article, ideally as a sidebar]

Protect Yourself

- Learn about HIV risks from blood and punctures in this series of articles.
- Swazis and other Africans who are aware of HIV risks from blood contact are less likely to be infected than those who are unfamiliar with such risks.



