

WHO IS THIS LEAFLET FOR?

This leaflet is for Muslims who are unsure about what HIV and AIDS are, and what it means to them and their families. The leaflet will also be of value to those who work with Muslims in a health advisory role. We hope that once you have read it you will have a better understanding of how HIV is transmitted and how people can prevent themselves from contracting the virus. People reading this may also get a better understanding of Islamic views on HIV and AIDS education. The leaflet also considers why it is important that people deal compassionately and sensitively with those who are living with HIV or AIDS.

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus which damages the body's defence system, stopping it from effectively fighting infections. When HIV enters the body, our defence system starts fighting the virus. Over time, our defence system becomes too weak to protect itself from many different kinds of infections. The virus lives in certain body fluids such as blood, semen, and vaginal fluids. It is this virus which causes AIDS.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is the abbreviation for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. People develop AIDS when certain infections and diseases affect them because HIV has weakened their bodies' defences. A person can live with HIV infection for a long time and not develop AIDS.

CAN YOU LOOK AT A PERSON AND TELL IF SHE/HE IS HIV POSITIVE (HAS HIV IN HIS/HER BODY)?

The answer is NO. By simply looking at someone you cannot tell if that person is HIV positive.

HOW CAN HIV GET INTO OUR BODIES?

HIV can be transmitted in the following ways:

- Unprotected sex, whether between a woman and man or between two men. (HIV transmission through sex between two women is very unlikely, although this may result in other sexually transmitted infections.)
- By sharing unsterilised needles, syringes and other injecting equipment.
- By blood transfusion with HIV infected blood or blood products e.g., plasma or Factor 8.
- Through organ transplants that are infected with HIV.
- Through artificial insemination with HIV infected semen.
- From an infected mother to her baby (either in the womb, during labour, or through breast-feeding).

IS BLOOD TRANSFUSION SAFE?

In the United Kingdom, all blood is checked for the HIV virus and therefore it is usually safe to receive blood. It is also safe to give blood as new syringes are used for every blood donor. This safety cannot be guaranteed, however, in less industrialised countries where adequate resources and health care standards may be lacking.

CAN YOU GET HIV THROUGH EVERYDAY CONTACT FROM SOMEONE WHO HAS THE VIRUS?

HIV cannot be passed on through everyday contact. HIV cannot be passed on by touching, shaking hands, kissing, using toilet seats, sharing cups, cutlery, crockery, towels, coughing and sneezing, swimming pools, mosquito and insect bites.

HOW CAN YOU PROTECT YOURSELF FROM HIV?

We know that HIV is mainly transmitted through unprotected sex with an infected person or through sharing infected needles or syringes. During sexual intercourse, using condoms is the only way to reduce the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. If used correctly they are up to 98% effective. Clean (sterilised) needles and syringes should be used every time in order to reduce the spread of HIV and hepatitis. Injecting drug users should not share injecting equipment.

HOW DOES ISLAM VIEW HUMAN LIFE AND HEALTH?

Human life is highly valued in Islam: it is considered a gift from Allah. In the Islamic view, Muslims are not supposed to think that it is their life with which they can do whatever they want. Instead, Allah has entrusted individuals with life. Muslims are supposed to look after life. A healthy body is a gift from Allah, and each individual is its trustee. Therefore Muslims believe we have no right to misuse or abuse the body.

The holy Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) has stressed the importance of health many times. He once said to his companion, 'O Abbas, ask Allah for health in this world and in the next' (An-Nasai). "No supplication is more pleasing to Allah than a request for good health" (Tirmidhi). Muslims should therefore avoid any act which may harm physical or spiritual health.

IS HIV AND AIDS AN ISSUE FOR MUSLIM COMMUNITIES?

Islam is a religion that is very close to human nature. It accepts the powerful sexual desires humans have. Therefore it encourages that these desires be fulfilled. It advocates and encourages marriage, and only through marriage should sexual desires be fulfilled. Like other religions, it provides us with a strict moral code for sexual enjoyment.

Islam also prohibits the use of substances which may impair the senses. Therefore the use of narcotics such as heroin and alcohol are strictly prohibited.

However, Muslims must recognise that people engage in sexual activities before marriage and are also having extra-marital sex. In addition, there are Muslims who inject drugs and who engage in homosexual and bisexual behaviour.

Islam means the submission or surrender of one's will to Allah. Therefore it follows that a Muslim may not do any act which is prohibited by Islam. However, Muslims need to be realistic and face the truth, and the truth is that not all Muslims follow their religion fully.

Sexual practices that are not allowed by Islam do exist. Therefore there is a need that Muslims accept reality and develop HIV and AIDS educational programmes for all Muslim communities. These programmes must put emphasis on Islamic moral values, but also inform people about the methods of protection from this life threatening illness.

Some Muslims may think HIV and AIDS are not issues for their communities. The reality is and has been rather different in many Muslim countries. It is therefore becoming extremely important that Muslims accept that they are equally vulnerable to HIV and AIDS.

DOES THE CONCEPT OF MODESTY IN ISLAM PERMIT US TO TALK ABOUT SEX?

Discussing HIV and AIDS involves discussing sexual and intimate matters. Islam has always encouraged discussion of matters which will help us protect health and life. Modesty in Islam does not mean that Muslims may not discuss sexual matters. Muslim men and women never felt shy to ask questions to the Prophet (pbuh) about intimate sexual matters. The Holy Qur'an discusses reproduction, creation, family life, menstruation, and ejaculation.

The Prophet (pbuh) has said, "Blessed are the women of the Ansar (citizens of Medina). Shyness did not stand in their way for seeking knowledge about their religion" (Bukhari & Muslim). The Qur'an and Hadiths, words and sayings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh), have repeatedly stressed the importance of acquiring knowledge. "Are they equal those who do and those who do not know?" Qur'an 39:9. It is through knowledge that Muslims can achieve closeness to Allah, marvel at his creative work, and appreciate rules of conduct given in the Holy Book and practiced by the Holy Prophet and his companions. Muslims need not feel embarrassed or shy when discussing or reading about HIV and AIDS.

However Islam does require people to be modest. Certain subjects are best discussed between members of the same sex. Publications containing explicit graphic illustrations of the sexual organs should be avoided.

