Know your status

- HIV-AIDS is still a big public health problem causing disease, disability, death. In 2017, globally, an estimated 940,000 people died from HIV related causes.
- The prevalence of HIV AIDS in Myanmar, i.e. the proportion of the population living with the disease, is one of the highest in the Region.
- The good news is that HIV AIDS is preventable. Further, it can be treated - life long - with good quality of life as a result.
- Due to prevention and treatment efforts, new HIV infections - and deaths from AIDS - are decreasing in Myanmar as well as globally. Knowing your HIV status will help: this newsletter special explains why.

What is HIV-AIDS?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) attacks the immune system of an infected person. Due to decreased immunity, the body cannot fight against infections by bacteria, fungi, and other viruses. The advanced stage of this condition is called Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Without treatment, HIV multiplies in the body. The infected person becomes weak, sick, and finally dies.

Signs and symptoms

After being infected with HIV, a person may not feel sick. At the same time, he or she can transmit HIV. When immunity begins to decrease, various ailments can affect the body:
- tuberculosis
- pneumonia
- fungal infections
- diarrhea
- weight loss wasting
- specific cancers, such as Kaposi’s sarcoma, or cancer of the cervix.

HIV situation in Myanmar, 2017*

- HIV prevalence is about 0.57% of the population.
- 11,000 new infections during the year.
- About 220,000 people living with HIV.
- 66% of people living with HIV are currently receiving Anti Retroviral Treatment (ART).
- About 7,000 people died from HIV-related causes.

How is HIV transmitted?

- HIV can be transmitted by exchange of body fluids infected by HIV. The most common example is through infected blood, though infected semen, vaginal secretions or breast milk can transmit HIV too.
- Most common forms of transmission are through unprotected sex and unsafe injecting drug use.

We are at risk of HIV infection by:

- having unprotected anal or vaginal sex;
- having sexually transmitted infections, such as syphilis, herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and bacterial vaginosis;
- sharing contaminated needles, syringes and injecting equipment & drug solutions when injecting drugs;
- receiving unsafe injections, blood transfusions, tissue transplantation, medical procedures that involve non-sterile cutting or piercing;
- experiencing accidental HIV exposure, for example through needle stick injuries among health workers.

* Overview of national response to HIV-AIDS, National AIDS Programme, Myanmar, 2018
How to reduce the risk of HIV transmission?

1. Practice **safe** sex - use condoms.
2. Avoid drug abuse - say no to injecting drugs.
3. Use **sterile** needles and syringes only. If you are a health worker, practice universal precaution and infection prevention.
4. Know your status. If you know you are HIV positive, you can get treatment **free of charge** from the public sector, without delay.
5. If you have a sexually transmitted disease, seek medical care.
6. If you have been prescribed antiretroviral treatment, take it regularly. As a result, your HIV load will much reduce. This also lowers the risk of HIV transmission, to your partner and to your baby.
7. If you feel you have a higher risk of HIV infection, seek health advice. There are different options for prevention, HIV testing, and obtaining treatment.

How can we know our HIV status?

**HIV cannot** be transmitted by kissing, hugging, shaking hands, sharing personal objects, food or water.

**HIV infection** is often diagnosed through rapid diagnostic tests. These detect the presence or absence of HIV antibodies. Results are mostly available same day. This helps early diagnosis, treatment and care.

What if I am HIV positive?

- Seek medical advice. Anti retroviral treatment, once prescribed, will reduce HIV load. Treatment must not be interrupted - and taken for life to maintain low HIV load.
- If you are pregnant, anti-retroviral treatment prevents HIV transmission to your baby.
- If you have other infections, health professionals will prescribe treatment for these infections. This may include preventive treatment for serious infections, such as tuberculosis, which may threaten your life.
- In general, antiretroviral treatment is given to people living with HIV regardless of immunity status.

Globally, in 2017, about 59% of adults and 52% of children living with HIV were receiving antiretroviral.