

Managing Disclosure of HIV Status

Information for UNHCR Staff working with Individual Cases



Due to established relationships of trust, refugees will often turn first to UNHCR field staff with confidential information, such as the results of an HIV test. While UNHCR staff are not trained in HIV and AIDS counseling, the following tips may guide colleagues who are confronted with such situations.

- 1. Listen:** Refugees come to UNHCR because they trust that UNHCR will listen and provide confidential assistance; give the person (Individual Case- IC) time to talk about all of his or her concerns. Don't rush or interrupt.
- 2. Determine IC's immediate, short term plans:** Individuals react in many different ways in response to HIV test results- some are more prepared to accept a positive test result than others. As with any interview with a refugee, discuss short term plans to determine the IC's state of mind; refer immediately to a professional service if you detect any potentially dangerous behaviour. Disclosure of the person's HIV status to the professional service is not necessary.
- 3. Limit your intervention:** While listening is critical, the services of a trained counselor are required to address the specific concerns of a person who has just discovered and/or decided to disclose their HIV status. As stated above, listen- but know your limits in terms of counseling and advice.
- 4. Be informed:** Every UNHCR staff member should be informed about the basics of HIV and AIDS. Brief information is provided on the back of this card; however, you should also have the relevant information on hand for referral to local services or non-governmental organization (NGO) partners that can provide further professional assistance.
- 5. Obtain consent for further disclosure:** Should you wish to refer the IC to another UNHCR colleague, an NGO or local service provider, explain to the IC to whom and why you would like to refer. Written consent for further disclosure is preferable, but oral consent is acceptable and should be documented in your notes. In all cases, the IC's decision on further disclosure should be an informed decision.
- 6. Arrange for a follow up consultation:** time and circumstances permitting, if necessary let the IC know that you are available to listen and discuss at another convenient time. It takes time for anyone to digest and process the results of an HIV test; the IC may not be ready to discuss possible implications of their HIV status. The IC may also wish to report back to you on the services provided by the referral organisation or colleague you have suggested for further assistance.

The information contained on this card is intended to guide UNHCR Field Staff in supporting refugees who have chosen to disclose their HIV status.

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. The virus is most commonly passed from one person to another through infected body fluids (e.g., blood, semen, or vaginal secretions). In addition, infected pregnant women can pass HIV to their baby during pregnancy or delivery, as well as through breast-feeding. Some people with HIV will develop AIDS as a result of their HIV infection. However, a person with HIV can live a long and productive life. AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. Acquired means that the disease is not hereditary but develops after birth. Immunodeficiency means that the disease causes a weakening of the body's natural defense or immune system. Syndrome refers to a group of symptoms that collectively characterise a disease. In the case of AIDS, this can include certain infections and/or cancers, as well as a decrease in the number of defense cells in the blood. **It is not critical to determine how one became infected with HIV;** it is more productive to help an individual to accept the news that they are HIV positive, to provide accurate information regarding their health status and services available, and to help them to plan for the future. This should be done through referral to a competent service provider, after obtaining consent for referral from the individual.

An individual's decision whether or not to disclose their HIV status to others should be respected. The individual is in the best position to decide whether conditions are conducive to support disclosure, as serious protection concerns can arise from forced or involuntary disclosure, or when disclosure happens in a non-supportive environment. Disclosure to others, if done with appropriate support and counseling, can have a number of positive results: it can assist the HIV positive person with acceptance of their HIV status, obtaining support from friends and family, preventing transmission to their partner, and making future plans. Support for disclosure should be provided by a trained counselor or social worker. **Anti-retroviral therapy (ART) is available in some countries.** These medications help reduce the amount of HIV in the body, and to allow the immune system to recover some of the ability to fight infection and disease. ART can delay the onset of AIDS, but is not a cure for AIDS. Not all HIV positive persons require ART; ART is only started when a person has begun to develop signs and symptoms related to AIDS. Seeking early medical attention and treatment for any illness is critical for a person living with HIV, as this can help maintain their health.

HIV, AIDS and Refugee Rights:

HIV status should not influence the right to seek and enjoy asylum, to return to one's country of origin or to be resettled to another country.

UNHCR strictly opposes mandatory HIV testing of asylum seekers, refugees or other persons of concern.

Certain countries require an HIV test as part of the medical screening for resettlement;

UNHCR should ensure that such testing is conducted in line with international standards and policies.

Confidential pre- and post-test counseling should be provided,

as well as referral to appropriate follow up care and support for individuals who test positive.