

Glossary of HIV/AIDS terms

Anti (retro) viral: Having the property of attacking (retro) viruses.

Cost of treatment: The direct cost of treatment for HIV/AIDS includes doctors' fees, test fees (for the HIV antibody test, X-rays, etc), hospital fees, fees for drugs and other forms of treatment and fees for home and hospice care.

CD4 cells: A type of blood cell, also known as T-helper cells or T-cells. When the immune system is functionally normally, CD4 cells protect the body by recognizing and destroying viruses and bacteria.

DNA: Deoxyribonucleic acid. The genetic material of most living organisms.

Home-based Care: The term is widely used, often in a positive light, but there is insufficient interrogation of who does the caring or whether there is any care at all for the patient. Home based care, in the face of stigma, lack of nursing skills and other financial and social priorities, sometimes becomes a form of neglect. "Care" is used as a euphemism to cover care and support, which can be done in the home under the right conditions, and for treatment, which properly belongs in hospitals or clinics.

Incidence/Prevalence: These do not mean the same thing. Incidence refers to the number of new infections within a defined period of time, while prevalence is a snapshot of the total number of people infected at a given point in time, usually expressed in terms of annual increase. An HIV incidence of 20 percent means that 20 percent more people will contract the virus in a given year than in the previous one. A prevalence among adults of over 30 percent means more than three in ten adults are living with HIV.

Palliative Care: This is treatment, which does not address the disease itself but improves the quality of life of the infected person, and it includes good nutrition.

Mother to Child Transmission: Transmission can occur before, during or after birth. This term places the onus of spreading the disease on a woman, ignoring that the woman is only the last link in a chain. A preferred term is parent to child transmission; perinatal transmission also is used because this shifts the emphasis to when the infection occurs and away from who is seen to have caused it.

Transmission: This word tends to be used to mask the fact that what is being talked about is sex because many people and journalists are uncomfortable talking about sex.

Treatment: The issue around this term is whether one is telling the full story or just a narrow story. In South Africa, for example, the discussion has become narrowly focused around a particular disease and particular treatment, ignoring the broader political issues around prevalence of disease and unavailability of treatment generally.

Syndrome/Disease: AIDS is, by definition, a syndrome, ie. it is a cluster of specific diseases, any of which the infected person might recover from.

Sero-status: Simply means whether an individual is HIV positive or HIV negative.

RNA: Ribonucleic acid. An organic compound storing genetic information.

Viral load: The quantity of the virus in the bloodstream, which is measured by sensitive tests. These tests are unavailable in most of Africa (this would be a good investigative story for journalists in African countries where the tests are unavailable).

Window period: It takes the immune system up to three months to produce antibodies to HIV that can be measured in the HIV antibody test. During this window period, an individual tests negative for the virus but is nevertheless capable of transmitting it to others.