



As Uganda prepares to commemorate the World AIDS Day on December 1, Vision Group is spearheading the drive to get everybody back and involved in the fight against HIV/AIDS. In November, New Vision is publishing a series of stories to highlight key issues for action. Today, Geoffrey Mutegeki explores the inroads that have been made in HIV/AIDS treatment

Why you need to test for HIV now

Lilian Nyangoma, 65, still has fresh memories of her daughter Rose Birungi, who died in 2013, following a three-month illness.

Birungi, who was a vendor in Mpanga market in Fort Portal town, left two children aged 10 and 15. The young children are now living with their grandmother Nyangoma, in the remote village of Karambi in Kabale district.

According to Nyangoma, her daughter died of HIV/AIDS-related illnesses.

"When she first fell sick, she said it was witchcraft from her colleagues at her workplace. She never went to hospital but stayed home to pray and fast," Nyangoma recalls.

Birungi's state deteriorated, but she refused to be taken to hospital. However, she was forcefully taken to Fort Portal Regional Referral Hospital, where she was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

The health workers tried to put her on drugs, but it was too late and she died few days later. Nyangoma believes that if her daughter had tested for HIV and known her status, she would still be alive.

"Had she tested and got to know she was positive she would not have died. She would have been put on drugs and would be living like all other people positively," Nyangoma says.

Case for Uganda

Many people in Uganda have died because from HIV-related illnesses due to the fact that they do not go testing.

The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS) estimates that about 400,000 of the 1.4 million people living with HIV in Uganda do not know they have the virus.

In Uganda, the policy is that HIV-positive people are enrolled on ARVs when their viral load (the amount of HIV in your blood) is 500 CD4 cell count or below.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends antiretroviral therapy (ART) for all HIV-positive as soon as possible after diagnosis, regardless of their viral load or CD4 count.

WHO also recommends giving ARVs to people who do not have HIV, but are at high risk of infection as an additional prevention strategy, such as rape



Market Vendors AIDS project members of St Balikudembe testing for HIV recently. HIV-positive people are enrolled on ARVs

victims and sexually assaulted individuals. They should be put on post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP as a way of preventing HIV infection after a recent possible exposure to the virus.

Dr Richard Mugahi, the Kabale district health officer explains that testing is the only way one can find out if one has HIV and when to go on ART.

"Your result might be negative, or positive, but it is always better to know your status so that you can move on with your life, or start treatment Julius Kyamanya, who has lived with HIV for 28 years, notes that having HIV is not fancy like people think when they see those giving testimonies about positive living.

"It's normal to feel worried about HIV, but testing for HIV can put your mind at ease and reduce the anxiety of not knowing. If I had not known about my status,

I would be long dead," Kyamanya says.

Why you should test

The UNAIDS 90-90-90 treatment target is that by 2020, 90% of people living with HIV know their HIV status, 90% of people who know their HIV-positive status are accessing antiretroviral treatment and 90% of people on treatment to have suppressed viral loads.

According to Dr Nelson Musoba, the Director General, Uganda AIDS Commission, early HIV, diagnosed means having a better chance of living a long and healthy life.

He explains that even if you haven't recently put yourself at risk of infection, making HIV testing part of your sexual health routine is a good habit to get into for a number of reasons.

"HIV attacks your immune system and weakens it, but if you're diagnosed early, you can

start HIV treatment and this will lower the levels of HIV in your body, protect your immune system from damage, and stop you getting ill," Musoba says.

He says that it is also important for couples to test, especially pregnant mothers in order to protect the unborn child from HIV/AIDS.

In Uganda it is compulsory for all pregnant mothers to test for HIV/AIDS to prevent transmission of the virus to their mothers. However, other persons, HIV/AIDS testing is voluntary.

"Getting an HIV test is quick, easy and free. It's also the only way to know for sure whether or not you have been infected. With the right treatment and care, people living with HIV can expect to live as long as the average person, so it's important to take control of your health by getting a test," says

Statistics

Worldwide, it is estimated that 17.1 million of the 36.9 million people living with HIV do not know their status.

Uganda's HIV prevalence rate stands at 6.5%.

Dr Ruth Aceng, Uganda's health minister, says getting tested is a crucial first step for people living with HIV to access life-saving antiretroviral therapy.

"The only way to know your HIV status is to get tested. A person who is HIV-positive may look and feel perfectly well, and be unaware that they are infected," Aceng says.

"If you are HIV-positive it is better to know as early as possible so that you can get the right treatment and support. It enables you plan your life and also you will not to spread the virus," Aceng says.

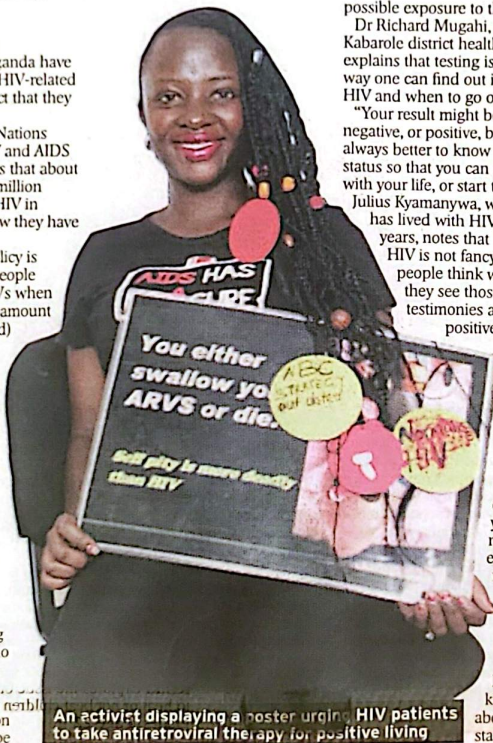
Yayeri Mugenyi who has lived with HIV for over 20 years.

It should be noted that testing for HIV regularly, and knowing your status, means that you can look after the sexual health of your partners too.

If you're positive, you can prevent HIV from being transmitted to your partner by using condoms. Also, by starting and staying on antiretroviral treatment you will reduce the levels of HIV in your body, making it less likely to pass HIV on.

Increased access to HIV testing and counselling is essential to promoting earlier diagnosis of HIV infection, which in turn can maximise the potential benefits of life-extending treatment

and care and allow people with HIV to receive information and tools to prevent HIV transmission to others.



An activist displaying a poster urging HIV patients to take antiretroviral therapy for positive living

Ministry of Health position

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