

DOCTOR WATITI

TOWARDS ZERO

Are new HIV infections about to end?

Q Dear Doctor, We are having many new HIV infections, especially among young girls. Men with HIV intentionally target young girls and yet they know they have the virus. Unfortunately, because of ARVs, no one can suspect them because they look healthy. How do we protect our young girls from such people?

Kimberly

A Dear Kimberly, The continued spread of HIV, especially among young women and adolescent girls, is of concern to us all. Unfortunately, cross-generational relationships, where older men have sexual relationships with younger women; often for economic reasons, are common in our community.

However, the virus spreads from people with

HIV, who have a high viral load or large amounts of HIV in their blood to those who do not have it; mainly through unprotected sex or from mothers to children through the mother-to-child transmission route.

To help people who do not have HIV not to get infected, we encourage them to know their HIV status; because many people just hope they are HIV-negative. The good thing is that most people do not have HIV, and need to be empowered to avoid risky behaviour like engaging in cross-generational sexual relationships that make negotiation for safer sex difficult or impossible.

People already infected with the virus need to be put on ARVs and supported to take the medicine with good adherence so that they have what is known as an undetectable viral load.

It has been scientifically shown that an undetectable viral load is untransmittable or "U=U".

We do not encourage cross-generational sexual relationships. However, if men with HIV who are on ARVs have undetectable viral loads, then they are not the ones responsible for the new HIV infections.

People with HIV who are infectious are those who are not on ARVs, many of whom do not even know they have the virus; or those who are on ARVs, but do not take the medicine with good adherence.

People are encouraged to use other HIV prevention methods like circumcision for men, abstinence, especially for young people still at school, using condoms correctly and consistently and ARVs used as post-exposure prophylaxis or pre-exposure prophylaxis.

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