

Aids Awareness Among University Students

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ABSTRACT The present survey was an attempt to check the level of awareness regarding AIDS among the students of Punjabi University at Patiala. The sample comprised of 300 students ranging in age between 20-25 yrs. The students were asked to fill the questionnaire provided. It was heartening to observe that almost everybody had heard about AIDS and no differences were observed on the basis of sex, faculty, education of the parents or family background. Most of the students gave correct answer when asked about the causative agent but only 20 per cent of the students were able to give the full form of HIV. However, even in such a highly educated group myths and misconceptions prevailed about the routes of transmission of virus. Regarding the transmission of HIV from the affected mothers to their babies only 8.69 per cent of the people were aware that it could be transmitted both prenatally, postnatally as also through mothers' milk. Majority of the students were aware that the disease was incurable and prevention was the only cure.

INTRODUCTION

Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is an immunoregulatory disease caused by a cytopathogenic virus known as *Human Immuno Deficiency Virus* or HIV. It exists in two different forms identified as HIV-1 found world wide and HIV-2 found mainly in West Africa (Kakar, 1995).

The first indication of its appearance was noticed in 1981 when increased incidence of Kaposi's sarcoma and *pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia were observed in young homosexuals and drug addicts. They appeared to have lost their immune competence, rendering them vulnerable to overwhelming and fatal infections with relatively avirulent micro-organisms. The condition was referred to as Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) as this was neither congenital nor inherited but acquired (Ananthanarayan and Paniker, 1990). HIV after penetrating the immune barrier speedily tears it down. It has a long latency period before it becomes active and causes AIDS.

The burden of AIDS weighs heavily on humanity. The infected people worldwide have shown an increase of 10 per cent during 1998, as reported by joint UN programme of HIV and AIDS (UNAIDS). Tragically 90 per cent of those infected have no idea that they are carrying HIV and thus are transmitting the infection unknowingly (Balasegaram 1998).

The present study was therefore designed with a dual purpose (i) to check the level of awareness among the University students and at the same time (ii) make them aware by providing indepth knowledge of it.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The sample comprised of 300 students (200 females and 100 males) in the age group of 20-25 years studying at Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab. Out of these 138 were science students and the rest were from arts faculty. The ratio of boys to girls was 1: 2 and the number of rural versus urban students was 88: 212.

A questionnaire was prepared. The problem to be studied was split into various aspects and questions were framed accordingly. Survey was conducted by making personal contact with the people to get information and to remove any doubt or suspicions regarding the nature of enquiry and meanings of the terms used in the proforma.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A number of factors such as sex, education, faculty (whether arts or science), rural or urban background, routes of transmission, and high risk groups etc. were taken into consideration in the questionnaire. All these factors are discussed one by one below.

Sex: It was heartening to observe that all the 300 subjects forming part of this study had heard about AIDS except one male subject i.e. 99.6 per cent of the people in our sample were aware of AIDS.

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Table 1a: AIDS Awareness: Faculty-wise

Sex	Science	Arts	Total
Males	40	59	99
Females	98	102	200
Total	138	161	299

Faculty: The only individual unaware of AIDS was from Arts faculty (Table 1a).

Rural Urban Background: No differences were observed on the basis of rural urban background. It appears that the media such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines etc. which have reached even the rural areas and had been giving a lot of coverage and information on AIDS have helped a lot in increasing the awareness of the people (Table 1b).

Table 1b: AIDS Awareness: Rural or Urban background

Sex	Rural	Urban	Total
Males	35	64	99
Females	53	147	200
Total	88	211	299

Education of Parents: Since we are dealing here with graduate students, the education of the parents did not matter much.

Have You Ever Heard About AIDS: The first question asked in the proforma was, if the students had ever heard about AIDS. Out of the 300 students, all the subjects responded in positive except one. Most of them informed that they came to know about AIDS either during their schooling i.e. at 10+2 level or in the college.

Full Form of AIDS: Out of 299 students who were aware of AIDS, only 102 (34 per cent) could tell the full form of AIDS correctly. Out of 102 correct responses majority i.e. 72 students (70.58 per cent) were from the science faculty and the rest from the arts. So, as expected most of the science students were able to give the full form of AIDS since the topic of AIDS was a part of their syllabi in many courses.

Causative Agent: About 230 (76.92 per cent) subjects gave the correct answer when asked about the causative agent. Out of the rest some were of the view that it was either bacteria, germs or something else and 10.70 per cent students did not respond to this question (Table 2).

Full Form of HIV: Very few people i.e. 60 (20.06

Table 2: AIDS Awareness: Causative agent /s

Causative Agent	Number of students	Per cent
Virus	230	76.92
Bacteria	10	3.34
Germs	2	0.66
Any other	25	8.36
No response	32	10.70

per cent) out of the total could give the expanded form of HIV i.e. Human Immuno Deficiency Virus. Even many science graduates were not able to do so.

First Source of Information: When questioned about the first source of information, 111 (37.12 per cent) mentioned television, as their first source of information. Eighty three subjects (27.75 per cent) gave the credit to their teachers followed by newspapers, magazines, friends, books, and parents etc. One subject came to know about it through a patient suffering from AIDS and one through the advertisement written on a public transport. So, in our study T.V. turned out to be the most important source of information and appears to be the best among media followed by teachers, another very responsible class of our society. Newspapers are also playing a very positive role in making people aware of this dreadful disease, which is playing havoc with the lives of people (Table 3).

Routes of Transmission: Only about 37.79 per

Table 3: AIDS Awareness: First source of information

Source	Number of students	Per cent
T.V.	111	37.12
Teachers	83	27.75
Newspaper	42	14.04
Magazines	30	10.03
Friends	17	5.68
Books	10	3.34
Parents	4	1.33
AIDS patient	1	0.33
Advertisements	1	0.33

cent of the people were fully aware of the various routes of transmission of HIV. Infact, 295 out of 299 (98.66 per cent) persons considered the sexual contact with an HIV infected person as the only route of transmission. A large number of people were still unaware of the very important route of transmission i.e. through infected blood. Very few people were aware of

the fact that the disease could spread by the instruments used for piercing nose/ears etc. also or at the barbers shop (Table 4).

Myths/Misconceptions About Transmission: Even in such a highly educated group, myths

Table 4: AIDS Awareness: Routes of transmission

Route	Number of students	Per cent
Sexual contact with an HIV infected person	295	98.66
Infected syringes and needles	237	79.26
Transfusion of an HIV infected blood	226	75.58
Instruments used for piercing nose/ear/ at the barber's shop (razor)	114	38.12
All the above routes	13	37.79

and misconceptions prevailed about the possible routes of transmission of the virus. Approximately, half of the subjects surveyed were aware that AIDS could not be transmitted by handshake, kissing, hugging, sharing of meals, swimming in the pools, using common toilets or through mosquito or bed bug bites. 70 persons did not respond to this question, including some science students. They did not know that AIDS cannot be transmitted by these routes. Whereas 52 students (17.39 per cent) had a wrong notion that AIDS could be transmitted by kissing. Among these respondents, there were a few science graduates also and some believed that AIDS could be caused by mosquito or bed bug bites. Two persons opined that all these routes could transmit this disease (Table 5).

Almost everyday, newspapers are providing some information regarding the AIDS. Sometimes full page advertisements are given on AIDS day i.e. on 1st of December. The purpose of all this is to make people aware of the accu-

Table 5: AIDS Awareness: Myths/misconceptions about transmission

Routes	Number of students	Per cent
Kissing	52	17.39
Bitten by mosquito or bed bug	44	14.71
Swimming in the pools used by AIDS patients	4	1.33
Common toilet	3	1.00
Handshake	1	0.33
Sharing meals	0	0
All the above	2	0.66
No response	70	23.41

rate modes of transmission and clear the misconceptions. Media through television is also doing its best to increase the awareness amongst masses. *Do You Think it is Your Duty to Inform Youngsters or Friends About AIDS:* More than 95 per cent of the persons were of the view that it was their prime duty to inform youngsters or friends about AIDS/HIV or consequences of its infection so that people can take precautions to avoid getting infected whereas the remaining (5 per cent) said that they did not consider it important enough.

Has AIDS been a Topic of Discussion Amongst Friends/ Colleagues: Majority of the youngsters informed that AIDS had been the topic of discussion amongst friends and colleagues, whereas a few did not think it important enough to discuss. *High Risk Group:* Approximately 18 per cent of the subjects were fully aware of all the high risk categories. Though 76.58 per cent people placed female sex workers in the high risk group, very few seemed to be aware of the fact that homosexuals are also in the high risk category (Table 6).

Table 6: AIDS Awareness and high risk groups

High Risk groups	Number of students	Per cent
Female sex workers	229	76.58
Children of affected parents	165	55.18
Frequent blood recipients	161	53.81
Drug addicts	100	33.44
Homosexuals	54	18.06
All the above	53	17.72
No response	5	1.67

Transmission from Affected Mothers to Their Babies: Different persons responded differently to this question, whereas 59.33 per cent were of the view that mothers could affect their babies prenatally i.e. before birth, some 23.74 per cent were ignorant of the fact that the mothers can affect their babies either prenatally or postnatally through mother's milk. Only 3.67 per cent of the respondents were aware that the affected mothers could transmit this disease postnatally through their milk to the babies. Some 3.34 per cent of the subjects were not sure about the route of transmission but opined that the affected mothers could transmit the disease to their babies whereas about 1 per cent were unable to express their views. Only 8.69 per cent were fully aware that

AIDS could be transmitted both prenatally and postnatally i.e. through mother's milk (Table 7).

Table 7: AIDS Awareness: Transmission of disease by affected mothers

Routes	n=299	
	Number of students	Per cent
Prenatal	178	59.53
Postnatal (through mother's milk)	11	3.67
Both prenatal and postnatal	26	8.69
Any other	3	1.00
All the above	1	0.33
No effect	71	23.74
No response	3	1.00

What is the Ultimate Effect of HIV Infection: When they were asked this question, 241 (80.60 per cent) people knew that AIDS causes death. A number of people were also aware of the fact that resistance or immunity becomes low in infected persons due to destruction of immune system, thus making body prone to ailments like cold, cough, fevers etc. i.e. secondary infections and ultimately death.

What Precautions can be Taken to Avoid It: 198 subjects (66 per cent) were aware of all the precautions to be taken to avoid AIDS. 48 subjects (16.05 per cent) were aware only of the sexual route and hence mentioned safe sex to avoid AIDS. 29 subjects mentioned both safe sex and safe blood transfusion as the preventive measures and 11 subjects (3.66 per cent) did not respond at all (Table 8).

Table 8: AIDS Awareness: Precautions to be taken

Routes	n=299	
	Number of students	Per cent
a. Safe sex	48	16.05
b. Use of sterilised or disposable syringes	3	1.00
c. Safe blood transfusion	2	0.66
d. All the above	198	66.00
e. Both a & b	29	9.39
f. Both a & c	9	3.01
g. No response	11	3.66

Is There Any Cure: When the subjects were asked about the cure, 242 (80.66 per cent) told that this disease is incurable. Some 14.33 per cent did not respond at all. About 5 per cent talked about Ayurvedic medicine or homeopathic treatment at the preliminary stages. Two subjects even mentioned the names of some antibiotics but were not sure whether these medicines were effective or not. Few people were of the view that correct information was not disseminated to rural masses and truck drivers and steps should be taken to make these people aware.

It was heartening to note that majority of the subjects approached during survey were aware of AIDS, its preventive measures and routes of transmission. Most of the students considered it their duty to inform others about the menace of AIDS. However, we must not forget that here we are dealing with a group of people, which is highly educated. The picture would have been entirely different if such a survey had been carried out in the slums. We are of the view that more such surveys should be conducted in slums and in tribal and remote areas to make people aware of this fatal incurable disease. AIDS is a hydra-headed monster which has refused to be tamed. It has been estimated by W.H.O. that by the turn of this century there will be 40 million people in the world who will be affected by HIV infection while the number of full blown cases would be about 12 million. So, need of the hour is to create awareness among the people especially the health professionals and lay public in order to prevent panic. Scientists today can manipulate viruses and the immune system in new ways and the possibility does exist that some engineered vaccine will prove viable in the future.

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