

World AIDS Day

Under the theme 'Getting to Zero', the world commemorates World AIDS Day. An event that was inaugurated 23 years ago today by the World Health Organisation, World AIDS Day focuses on raising money, increasing awareness, fighting prejudice, and improving education on the issue of the AIDS pandemic caused by the HIV infection.

Observed on December 1st each year, the World AIDS Campaign is the leading international organisation which plans and implements the observance of the day and provides governments, national AIDS programmes, faith organisations, community organisations, and individuals with an opportunity to raise awareness and focus attention on the AIDS pandemic worldwide.

The Red Ribbon used is the global symbol for solidarity with HIV-positive people and those living with AIDS.

This year's theme marks the commitment of the global community to focus on the achievement of the following three targets: Zero new HIV infections, zero discrimination and Zero AIDS-related deaths. World AIDS Day is important for reminding people that HIV has not gone away, and that there are many things still to be done. It also provides all of us with the opportunity — on an individual, community and political level — to take on the challenge of getting to zero.

According to UNAIDS estimates, there are now 34 million people living with HIV, including approximately 2.5 million children. During 2010, some 2.7 million people became newly infected with the virus, including an estimated 390,000 children.

Despite a significant decline in the estimated number of AIDS-related deaths over the last five years due to improved access to antiretroviral treatment and care in many regions of the world, the AIDS epidemic still claimed an estimated 1.8 million lives in 2010.

The vast majority of people with HIV and AIDS live in lower- and middle-income countries. But HIV today is a threat to men, women and children around the world. In low- and middle-income countries, less than half of those in need of antiretroviral therapy are receiving it, and too many do not have access to adequate care services.

The Caribbean, one of the regions of the world that is most affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, reduced the number of new HIV infections by a third from 2001 levels and by more than 25 per cent in Dominican Republic and Jamaica.

However, we are not there yet and are still ranked amongst the highest in the world with an estimated 240,000 people living with HIV and AIDS in the Caribbean at the end of 2009 and an estimated 17,000 newly affected and 12,000 new deaths.

In two countries in this region — The Bahamas and Haiti — more than two per cent of the adult population is living with HIV. These statistics are only rivalled by those of sub-Saharan Africa, making the Caribbean the second most affected region in the world.

Overall, the main route of HIV transmission in the Caribbean is through sexual intercourse. Much of this transmission is associated with commercial sex, but the virus is also spreading in the general population. Cultural and behavioural patterns (such as early initiation of sexual acts and taboos related to sex and sexuality), gender inequalities, lack of confidentiality, stigmatisation, and economic need are some of the factors influencing vulnerability to HIV and AIDS in the Caribbean. As a result, AIDS is now one of the leading causes of death in some of these countries, with Haiti being the worst affected. An estimated 7,500 lives are lost each year to AIDS in Haiti, and thousands of children have been orphaned by the epidemic.

This year, we are asking you to Be Aware. Being aware means finding out the facts about HIV and using this knowledge to protect yourself and others. Promote awareness amongst friends, family members and loved ones; take part in AIDS awareness initiatives and ensure that the message is passed on to all, so that we may be one step closer to reaching zero.