

## Teach, reach youth about HIV/AIDS

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Katie is hanging around after everyone has left the youth group meeting. With a frightened look, she asks to talk with you. She tells you she just found out she is HIV positive. How do you respond?

Katie is part of an alarming trend in the United States. The statistics are disturbing.

- More than 50 percent of all new HIV infections in the U.S. occur in young people under age 25. Most are infected sexually.
- AIDS related illnesses are the sixth leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds.
- HIV/AIDS is the second leading cause of death among people between the ages of 25 and 44 and the leading cause of death among African Americans in this age group, suggesting many were infected as teenagers.
- Every hour, two Americans under age 20 are infected with HIV.
- By the time they are high school seniors, 82 percent of teenagers have had sex; 50 percent say they don't use condoms regularly. Of senior girls, 1 in 7 has had more than four sex partners.
- Young women new to sex generally have older partners, who often dissuade them from using protection.
- The number of young heterosexual women contracting HIV climbed 63 percent between 1991 and 1995. Women comprise the fastest-growing population of new HIV infections.

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### Talking about HIV/AIDS

For many, HIV/AIDS is not an easy, comfortable topic. It requires open and honest discussion about sexuality, drug use, being ostracized, fear, death, grief and more. It also requires that parents and leaders face the reality that there may be young people in their congregation who participate in at-risk behaviors. Some of the congregation's young people may already be HIV positive or know someone who is. Consider these tips in talking about the disease in your safe, faith-filled environment:

- Tell parents you'll be talking about HIV/AIDS. In advance, share with them your outline, perspective and activities.
- Teach the basics of how the virus is transmitted. Separate myths from facts. Don't assume everyone has the correct information.
- Assume that someone in your group and/or congregation is HIV positive, and that some members in your group participate in at-risk behaviors for contracting the virus.
- Invite a person who is HIV positive to talk to your group; it helps to make it real.
- Set appropriate boundaries for discussion, including respect for what is said and confidentiality.
- Be prepared to follow up on an individual level.

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## Myths and Facts

### Myths

*HIV is NOT transmitted by:*

- donating blood
- mosquito bites or bites from other bugs
- sneezes or coughs
- touching, hugging or dry kissing a person with HIV
- urine or sweat of an infected person
- public restrooms, saunas, showers or pools
- sharing towels, clothing, eating utensils or drinks
- being friends with a person who has HIV/AIDS

### Facts

*HIV is transmitted by:*

- sexual intercourse
  - sores or breaks in the mucous membrane or skin that are exposed to infected blood, semen or vaginal secretions
  - shared razors, tattoo or piercing equipment which might have blood on them
  - shared syringes, needles and cookers
  - breast milk
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### Ideas for action

Encourage young people to help others through education, advocacy and care giving:

- Ask worship leaders/pastors to include HIV/AIDS stories, issues and concerns in sermons and prayers.
  - Volunteer to visit, provide meals, transportation or other services to people living with AIDS.
  - Write about experiences you, your friends or your family has had related to HIV/AIDS. Share them with your congregation and/or community.
  - Volunteer to provide HIV prevention education to younger youth and children in your congregation.
  - Wear red AIDS awareness ribbons.
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### Resources

- "AIDS and the Church's Ministry of Caring. Message of the ELCA on AIDS." Augsburg Fortress, 800.328.4648, #67-1181. Free.
- *Brokenness to Wholeness: An HIV/AIDS Prevention Curriculum*. Four-session curriculum for youth ages 15-18. Explores the realities of HIV in light of people's faith. Facilitator Guide and reproducible Participant Book.

Developed by the Lutheran AIDS Network (LANET). Augsburg Fortress, 800.328.4648, #6-0000-7453-0, \$14.99.

- ELCA HIV/AIDS Clearinghouse and Speakers Bureau, 800.638.3522 ext. 2797, hiv aids@elca.org.
- Lutheran AIDS Network, 800.664.3848.
- *World AIDS Day Resource Booklet*. Ideas for observing World AIDS Day and teaching AIDS awareness. American Association for World Health, 202.466.5883. First booklet free.

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Faith-based HIV/AIDS Web sites

*ELCA:*

[www.elca.org/dcs/hiv/aids.html](http://www.elca.org/dcs/hiv/aids.html)

*The Balm in Gilead (African American):*

[www.balmingilead.org](http://www.balmingilead.org)

*Religion and AIDS Resources:*

[www.thebody.com/religion.html](http://www.thebody.com/religion.html)

*Lutheran AIDS Network:*

<http://www.lutheranaids.net/>

*National Episcopal AIDS Coalition:* [www.neac.org](http://www.neac.org)

*United Methodist HIV/AIDS Network:*

<http://gbgm-umc.org/health/aids/>

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