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AIDS rates falling, but more can be done

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It sounds impossibly optimistic, but it may be true: The end of AIDS could be near. The wider use of effective drugs, more treatment for stigmatized groups, and a slow and steady growth of health care efforts are all paying off.

The results are by no means even - some parts of the world are doing better than others - but it's a far cry from barely a decade ago, when health planners were flailing for a strategy to combat the HIV virus that spawns AIDS. The numbers outlined in a U.N. study continue past trends that have shown a downward curve in infection rates.

The evidence is inspiring on the eve of World AIDS Day coming on Dec. 1. Over the past 10 years, new cases have dropped by half in 25 poor- and middle-income countries considered the red-zone for new cases. These areas take in sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, all closely watched in global prevention efforts.

In recent years, the key issue was scaling up the use of life-prolonging drugs that muted the deadly effects of full-blown AIDS. These drugs - largely designed in this country - had an extra benefit: They also limited transmission of the virus, especially from mother to child during birth, a significant infection point.

As drug prices came down and health services grew, more countries were able to brake the disease's spread. Another factor played into this success. Countries that had marginalized high-risk groups such as prostitutes, gays and drug users widened programs to include these populations. Education efforts from billboards to condom giveaways broke down the stigma of the disease.

With 34 million people living with AIDS, the fight isn't over. Though infection rates are dropping, there's still a troubling gap between those receiving drugs and those who are left out. Wealthy nations led by the United States are wavering in financial commitments to major AIDS-fighting agencies. The public's awareness has faded as the problem stabilized and a virtual death sentence gave way to a near-normal life sustained by antiretroviral drugs.

This diminished awareness is why it's useful to consider a national test for the HIV virus. A panel of medical experts now suggests that everyone in the United States between 15 and 64 be tested at

least once. It may sound strange at first - why should a fading disease get this targeted attention? - but it comes with serious purpose.

There are an estimated 1.2 million HIV-infected people in this country, and up to a quarter of them don't know it. Routine testing would screen out this subgroup and steer them toward treatment that for years never existed.

Wider testing, along with education and effective drugs, could contain this epidemic. It's not time to back away from the goal of an AIDS-free generation.

The changing AIDS picture

Deaths: 1.7 million worldwide in 2011, down from 2.3 million in 2005.

Infections: 2.5 million in 2011, down from more than 3 million in 2001.

Treatment: 8 million receiving AIDS drugs, 20 times the number in 2003.

Challenges: Sub-Saharan Africa accounts for 71 percent of the AIDS cases. Of the 1.7 million deaths last year, 1.2 million were in these 47 countries.

[See the topic on aegis.org](http://aegis.org)