

AIDS: ADVICE TO TRAVELLERS (continued)

Risk to the traveller

In view of the known modes of transmission, travellers must be aware that there is essentially no risk of acquiring AIDS unless:

- a) They are recipients of contaminated blood or blood products;
- b) They are recipients of drugs or medication from unsterile needles and syringes;
- c) They are engaging in sexual activity with an infected person.

Recommendations

1. In some underdeveloped countries, a significant proportion of the blood available for transfusion is infected. In countries where it can be certain that blood donations are screened for HIV antibody, transfusion presents little risk. In any circumstance, the decision to receive a blood transfusion must always be weighed against the likelihood of illness or death if the transfusion is not received. Individuals who must have surgery should consider the possibility of postponing the procedure or proceeding to another region or country where the risks of infection are lower. Hemophiliacs must assure themselves that any blood product they receive is either screened for HIV antibody or heat-treated. In some countries the Canadian High Commission or Embassy or other embassies may have emergency supplies of blood, plasma or appropriate fluids or have a roster of individuals upon whom they can call for emergency blood or plasma donations.

2. Individuals who require medication which can only be given in injectable form must ensure that injection equipment has been correctly sterilized. If this cannot be assured, then injection should be avoided and, if possible, alter-

native oral medication should be taken. It should be pointed out that when passing through the Custom Zones, an individual found to be in possession of needles and syringes may lead to the suspicion of being a drug user. A letter of authorization from a physician or organization may help in these circumstances. If high quality sterile equipment can be purchased in the destination country then this is the preferable method when such equipment is required.

3. Every effort should be made to avoid sexual exposure to HIV. Since there is risk of exposure through intercourse with someone who is infectious but asymptomatic and apparently healthy, extreme caution must be taken. Unprotected intercourse represents an unacceptable risk. Rectal intercourse should be avoided under any circumstances, because it is a particularly high risk practice. When intercourse is inevitable, then a latex condom must be used to prevent the transfer of the virus from one person to another.

4. Individuals who are not members of high risk groups (that is male homosexuals or bisexuals, recipients of blood or blood products, intravenous drug users, and sexual partners of the above) are not advised to obtain the HIV antibody test prior to travel. Some countries require antibody testing of some travellers; for example, those seeking permanent visas, work permits or student authorization. Persons who are HIV antibody positive may not be granted an appropriate permit and may be advised to leave the country. Travellers with AIDS should ensure that there are adequate medical services in the areas to which they are proceeding and carry appropriate information concerning their condition.

Conclusions

There are no vaccines available to control AIDS. Travellers, however, should ensure that they are adequately immunized against diseases which are prevalent in the parts of the world to which they are travelling, and should seek the advice of a physician concerning the risk of certain vaccines being administered to individuals who are infected. Appropriate medication to prevent malaria should also be taken.

Individuals who are healthy and well-nourished are less likely to contract diseases when travelling. For the most part, travel to the developing world and to the tropics does not present a great risk of contracting diseases, including AIDS. In the event of illness or accident where transfusion is life-saving, it should be taken. Where it can be safely avoided or deferred, the preferred option is to do so.

Once again, it is worth repeating that AIDS is not acquired through social or casual contact. Avoidance of infected blood, blood products, unsterile injections and "unsafe" sexual activity will generally ensure a safe and healthy visit. An understanding of the transmission patterns of AIDS and other diseases, and the practice of basic common sense and healthy living, are key factors in enjoying a trip away from one's home country. □

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