

# CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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## **AIDS is a Special Risk for Women and Girls**

Each year, December 1<sup>st</sup> is designated as World Aids Day to keep the focus of the international community on this disease so that the impact of AIDS might be lessened. By continually reminding us of the ramifications of this illness, it is hoped the global response to AIDS will increase in speed as well as dimension so that new infections can be prevented, those with the disease will have equal access to care and treatment, and the impact of AIDS can be reduced and one day eradicated. The theme this year is “Women, Girls, HIV, and AIDS.”

AIDS affects women and girls around the world in a number of ways. The idea that AIDS is a disease mainly affecting gay men or drug users is a misconception; most HIV infections result from heterosexual sex, and women are more likely to become infected than men. The most common source of infection for women is through a husband or partner.

Once a woman is infected, she is in danger of transmitting the disease to her unborn children. In fact, of all the babies infected in 2003 with HIV, the mothers transmitted the disease in 90% of the cases.

In addition, women frequently are the victims of sexual violence. Not only are women generally at risk as victims of crime, but in war-ravaged lands, such as Rwanda and Kosovo, thousands of women reportedly were raped and purposely infected with HIV during a campaign of “ethnic cleansing.”

Another concern in the fight against AIDS in women is that of discrimination. While it is a problem of varying proportions throughout the world, generally women face discrimination in educational opportunities, employment, and in some places, healthcare. When women become infected, not only are their children at risk, but as the disease progresses, she is unable to care for her family, unable to contribute to the household income, and incurs large medical bills if she is able to get treatment.

Despite continued efforts to prevent, cure, and mitigate the effects of AIDS, estimates for 2004 place the number of new infections at 4.8 million people worldwide. 35.7 million adults and 2.1 children were living with HIV at the end of 2003; about 50% of AIDS victims die before reaching the age of 35. While it is true that 95% of the total number of people with AIDS live in developing nations, this disease remains a threat to people of all ages throughout the world.

World AIDS Day serves as a reminder that AIDS has not gone away, and much remains to be done. The need for raising money never stops, and the need for public education about the disease as well as the eradication of prejudice are just as important. Until people with HIV and AIDS can feel free to live their lives without fear of reprisal for their condition, progress in preventing the spread of these diseases will be slow. The secrecy surrounding both of these

conditions leads to misunderstanding and unnecessary fear, resulting in the failure to address the medical, social, economic, and emotional needs of the victims.

Further information about AIDS and HIV is available at the following web sites: [www.AIDS.org](http://www.AIDS.org), [www.unaids.org](http://www.unaids.org), and [www.AVERT.org](http://www.AVERT.org). To obtain free confidential information about HIV and AIDS, contact the National AIDS Helpline at 0800-012-322, or visit their web site at [www.aidshelpline.org.za](http://www.aidshelpline.org.za). Residents also may call the Central Connecticut Health District to obtain information about this or other public health concerns at 721-2822 ([www.ccthd.org](http://www.ccthd.org)).