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Lon Chin's story

Lon Chin is a student in a small town near Xian in central China, where her parents raise ducks. She worked very hard in high school and was chosen to go to the national university in Beijing. She did very well at the university and was the top student in her English class. During her last year she won a scholarship to study English in the United States. She was very excited, but her parents were afraid to let her go. "It is too dangerous to study in the United States. Isn't it true that people are dying in the streets from AIDS? Besides, we don't want you to live in dormitories with students from Africa, India, and Latin America, where AIDS is so common." Lon Chin became frightened herself.

Not knowing what was true, she decided to ask you, her local health worker, for answers.

HIV in different regions of the world

Each day about 15,000 people are newly infected with HIV. Who is infected, and how they got HIV, is different in different areas of the world. When HIV first appears in a country, most infections occur in people who frequently have unsafe sex, especially with more than one partner; in people who inject drugs; or in people who have had blood transfusions. These people make up a small percentage of the whole population, but they are at high risk of infection. This is the early stage of the epidemic. North America is in this stage; there, most HIV infections have occurred among drug injectors, their sexual partners, and men who have sex with men.

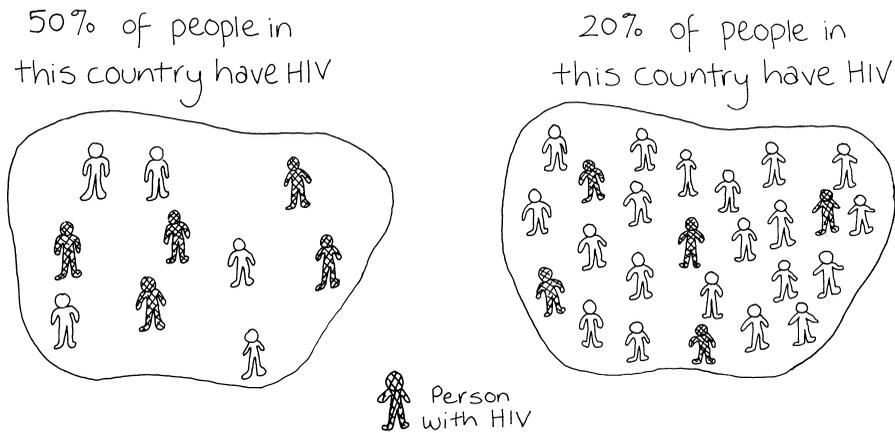
However, over time, infections spread to others. Sometimes this happens very quickly. For example, in Africa south of the Sahara Desert, HIV quickly spread among sex workers, through transfusions of HIV-infected blood, and along truck routes, where truck drivers and travelers spread the infection from community to community. Now, most people newly infected with HIV are under the age of 25, most are infected through sexual contact between women and men, and many are married. The rate of HIV infection is high, and in many cities over 30% of adults have HIV. Babies are often infected with HIV. This pattern is most common in countries where HIV has been present for a long time. There, the HIV epidemic is at a late stage.

In both the late and early stages of an HIV epidemic, much can be done to prevent new infections. In fact, in several countries the news is good. In Uganda, a country with a late-stage epidemic, the number of people newly infected with HIV has dropped because volunteers, health workers, and the government have run prevention programs and educated the public. In Thailand, another country with a late-stage epidemic, a “100% condom use” campaign promoting condom use among sex workers has lowered the number of new infections among young men in the army. In the United States, the number of drug injectors newly infected with HIV has dropped in certain cities because of education and needle-exchange programs (see Chapter 12).

In 2004, almost 5 million people were newly infected with HIV; 640,000 of these were children. Most of these people live in the less industrialized coun-

tries of the world. Most people with HIV in the world today do not even know that they have the virus.

Information used in this chapter was collected by the United Nations AIDS program (UNAIDS). Most of the numbers are estimates of the true number of cases of HIV or AIDS. For cases of AIDS, the numbers are *reported* cases, not the true number of cases, because some countries have more money, more HIV testing, and better reporting than other countries. Some countries are able to report a higher number of cases not because they really have more, but because they have had more reported. Also, a few countries do not want others to know how much HIV they have and do not report all of their AIDS cases. No country can diagnose and report every case of AIDS, but some do better than others. The total number of people with HIV or AIDS is often not as important as the percentage of people infected (see Chapter 3). A country with a small population and 10,000 cases of AIDS has a much more serious problem than a country with a large population and the same number of cases.



Both countries have the same number of people with HIV, but the country with the smaller population has a more serious HIV problem—50% of the people living there have HIV.

Men, women, and HIV

In most countries in Africa, the number of women who have HIV is equal to or greater than the number of men with HIV. This is because in Africa the virus is mainly spread through sex between women and men. In some other countries more men have HIV than women. This is true in the United States, where HIV spread very quickly among drug injectors and men who have sex

People living with HIV

Region	Adults & children living with HIV	Adult prevalence rate
Africa South of the Sahara	25,400,000	7.4%
South & Southeast Asia	7,100,000	0.6%
Latin America	1,700,000	0.6%
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	1,400,000	0.8%
East Asia & Pacific	1,100,000	0.1%
North America	1,000,000	0.6%
Western Europe	610,000	0.3%
North Africa & Middle East	540,000	0.3%
Caribbean	440,000	2.3%
Australia & New Zealand	35,000	0.2%
39,325,000 total		1.1% worldwide average



with men. However, the ratio of men to women with HIV is changing in the United States because men who have sex with men are more often having “safer sex” (see Chapter 5), and the virus has continued to spread to women through sex and drug use. In a few years we expect the number of women newly infected with HIV to be greater than the number of men.

Women and HIV	
Region	Percentage of adults living with HIV who are women
Africa South of the Sahara	57%
North Africa & Middle East	48%
South & Southeast Asia	30%
Eastern Europe & Central Asia	34%
East Asia & Pacific	22%
Australia & New Zealand	21%
Western Europe	25%
North America	25%
Latin America	36%
Caribbean	49%
	47% worldwide average

Africa South of the Sahara Desert

Most people with HIV live in Africa, in countries south of the Sahara Desert. Only 10% of the world's people live in this region, but 60% of people with HIV in the world live there. That is about 25.4 million people with HIV.

A commitment on the part of local activists and health workers and national and international governments has decreased the numbers of people getting HIV in a few places — the percentage of Ugandans with HIV has been decreasing for several years. But in other places, the rate just keeps going up. In South Africa, almost 30% of pregnant women had HIV in 2003. Because of HIV, the average age of death in Zimbabwe is only 34 years old, while in 1990 a Zimbabwean would have been expected to live to around 52.

The crisis of HIV in Africa has been particularly devastating to women. About 13 women become infected for every 10 men there.

HIV once mostly infected people living in cities or near main highways. Now it has spread to villages throughout most countries.

Latin America and the Caribbean

When HIV first appeared in Latin America in the 1980s, it mostly spread among drug injectors and men who had sex with men. Now nearly 2 million people in this region are living with HIV. There were 240,000 new HIV infections in 2004. During the same year there were 95,000 deaths due to AIDS. In Mexico as many as 15% of men who have sex with men are living with HIV. In the Dominican Republic 2% of adults have HIV. In Jamaica, girls are over 2.5 times as likely to have HIV as boys, because older, HIV infected men seek young girls to have sex with. Haiti's life expectancy is nearly 6 years less than it would be if there was no AIDS epidemic. Brazil's success in giving antiretroviral treatment to 105,000 people has avoided 234,000 hospitalizations and saved many lives between 1996 and 2000. Despite increased treatment for AIDS, in Latin America and the Caribbean AIDS kills more people each year than traffic accidents.

North America and Western Europe

In North America and Western Europe, HIV first spread between men having sex with each other and also drug users sharing needles. Now HIV has spread into all social groups and is frequently spread by sex between men and women. In Western Europe in 1997, 25% of new HIV diagnoses were of women. In 2002, women accounted for 38% of new cases.

While rates of HIV are still slowly increasing in the US, deaths from AIDS have gone down since antiretroviral drugs became available there in 1995. Most people with HIV in the wealthy countries of North America and Western Europe have reliable access to these medicines.

As in most of the world, HIV has the worst effect on people who are poor and who experience other kinds of discrimination. In the US, where 1 of every 4 African Americans lives in poverty, the rate of HIV is disproportionately high in that group. 12% of people in the US are African American, but 25% of people with HIV are African American. Among new cases of HIV in women, 72% are found in African Americans.

Just like in many other areas of the world, HIV is more common in cities than in rural areas. In many large cities, including New York City, AIDS has become the number one cause of death in adults between 20 and 40 years of age. By the end of 2000, New York City had reported 118,123 cases of AIDS.

South and Southeast Asia

HIV started to spread in South and Southeast Asia in the early 1990s. This is later than in other areas of the world, but the number of people infected has increased very rapidly. Over 1 million people were infected with HIV in 2004 and there are now over 8 million people in South and Southeast Asia living with HIV. Currently, more than 5 million people in India are living with HIV. The epidemic in China shows no sign of slowing down and new HIV infection rates are increasing. China has few programs to teach people about HIV prevention.

In Cambodia and Thailand where there are large prevention programs, new HIV cases are decreasing. In Thailand where people have learned to use condoms, HIV is spreading less through sex. There are few programs to help prevent HIV among drug users though, and 30% of drug injectors are infected.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia

In Eastern Europe, the HIV crisis is still in its early stage. More than 1 million people have HIV in this region. Over 80% of these infections are among people who are younger than 30 years old.

In the Russian Federation injecting illegal drugs such as heroin or methamphetamine is very common. As many as 2% of the people there use these drugs. Right now, most HIV cases in Russia are found among drug users. They can then pass the disease to others by sharing needles or through sex. In the Ukraine, 30% of new infections now occur during sex between a man and a woman.

Many changes are taking place in this part of the world including wars and changing of national borders. These conditions often hasten the spread of disease.

Answering Lon Chin's questions

“It is too dangerous to study in the United States. Isn't it true that people are dying in the streets from AIDS? Besides, we don't want you to live in dormitories with students from Africa, India, and Latin America, where AIDS is so common.”

You can tell Lon Chin that many people in the United States have HIV and AIDS. But just like everywhere else in the world, HIV is only spread through

unsafe sex, from a mother to her baby, through dirty needles and other instruments, and through transfusions of HIV-infected blood. The United States tests its blood supply for HIV, which means that the blood supply is safe. Although many people in the United States have HIV, they make up only a small percentage of the millions of people living in the country. Also, when people with AIDS die, they usually do so in a hospital or at home—not in the street.

Studying with people from Africa, India, and Latin America has never caused anyone to get HIV. HIV is not spread by studying! Many places in the world have an HIV problem. Only knowledge of how the virus is spread will help people avoid the virus. If Lon Chin does not have unsafe sex or use drugs, then she is as safe from HIV in the United States as she is in China—or anywhere else.