



DECEMBER IS

HIV/AIDS

AWARENESS MONTH

History of AIDS Awareness Month

HIV/AIDS, or the human immunodeficiency virus and its associated immune deficiency syndrome, first appeared in the Congo in the 1920s, spread to the Western Hemisphere via the Caribbean in the 1960s, and became a global pandemic in the 1980s as cases exploded around the world.

Because the first diagnosed patients were gay men, it was first believed that AIDS only affected homosexuals, drug users, and later people of Haitian origin. As scientists discovered more about the disease, they learned it was caused by a virus that could be transmitted in several ways and could affect anyone. By the end of 1985, more than 20,000 cases of AIDS were reported all over the world. Doctors and researchers scrambled to understand the infection and develop treatments and vaccines.

In 1987, the first antiretroviral medication effective in treating HIV, azidothymidine (known as AZT), was developed. A positive diagnosis was no longer a death sentence, but despite new information and treatment options, HIV/AIDS continued to spread. By the end of the 1980s, AIDS was a full-blown crisis, with more than 400,000 diagnosed cases.

To date, about 35 million people have died from AIDS, and roughly that same number live with the virus. In 2010, there were over 20 approved treatment options for HIV/AIDS, and new treatments are developed all the time. No vaccine exists yet, but thanks to anti-retroviral drugs and constantly improving treatment options, it's now possible for an HIV patient with access to care to live a full and healthy life.



WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AIDS & HIV?

HIV stands for 'human immunodeficiency virus'. HIV belongs to a group of viruses called retroviruses. HIV attacks white blood cells within the immune system. These cells will stay infected for the rest of their lives. If untreated, HIV will develop into AIDS.

AIDS stands for 'acquired immune deficiency syndrome'. (It's sometimes referred to as 'late stage HIV' or 'advanced HIV disease'.) It is an umbrella term for the illnesses that occur due to having untreated HIV infection for several years, by which point the immune system is severely damaged and unable to fight off infections. The illnesses and symptoms will vary for each person that has AIDS, but may include life-threatening infections and cancers.

Every person who has AIDS has HIV, but not every person with HIV will develop AIDS. Because there are now lots of treatment options available for people living with HIV, far fewer people are developing AIDS. Often, those that do develop AIDS are people who have not been tested for HIV and have never taken treatment. Once started on HIV treatment, death due to AIDS can be prevented.

