

Headline	Sex now chief cause of Ukraine's AIDS epidemic	Language	English
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Sex now chief cause of Ukraine's AIDS epidemic

KIEV: "I am not a drug addict!" insisted Andri, 32, staring desperately at the walls of a clinic for people with HIV in Kiev.

The young father contracted HIV through a casual sexual relationship, like alarming numbers of others in a country where heterosexual transmission has overtaken drug abuse as the main cause of AIDS.

The trend has alarmed researchers, showing that the HIV epidemic in Ukraine has now moved out of the niche of intravenous drug users and into the heterosexual mainstream.

With an HIV prevalence rate of 1.11 percent among Ukraine's adult population as of 2009, the former Soviet republic is one of the states in Europe worst hit by the epidemic.

For years, the virus has been spread mainly in Ukraine by intravenous drug users but the trend has changed with startling speed.

Since 2008, more Ukrainians have been contracting HIV through heterosexual sex than through drug abuse. In 2009, 43 percent of Ukrainians infected with HIV caught the virus through heterosexual sex and 35 percent by drug injection.

Experts have warned that this means the epidemic risks no longer affecting mainly high-risk groups like drug users, prostitutes and homosexuals but the general population as a whole.

"There are already signs of a generalisation" with the HIV infection rate of pregnant women now standing at more than one percent in some regions, said Svitlana Antonyak, an official from

the national HIV clinic.

"Two thirds of cases of sexual transmission are linked to intravenous drug use," said Tetyana Deshko of the Ukrainian branch of the NGO International HIV/AIDS alliance.

She described the typical path of transmission in today's Ukraine: "A drug user who probably does not know he is HIV positive has a relationship with a woman who probably does not know that her partner is a drug user."

Andri was infected with HIV during an adulterous relationship with a former lover who he suspects now is a drug addict.

"I saw the traces of injections on her arms but she said it was because she had just been to hospital," said Andri, who learned of his diagnosis at the start of the year.

Almost half of Ukrainians between 25-49 who say they had more than one sexual partner in a year do not use condoms, said a national report compiled by the Ukrainian ministry of health for UNAIDS.

"A condom is often seen (in Ukraine) as a sign of not trusting your partner," said Tetyana Deshko. Moreover many in Ukraine still see AIDS as a problem affecting only disadvantaged groups." - AFP

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A nurse injects AIDS/HIV a patient laying on mattresses during their protest in front of the Ukrainian Cabinet of Ministers in Kiev. PHOTO:AFP