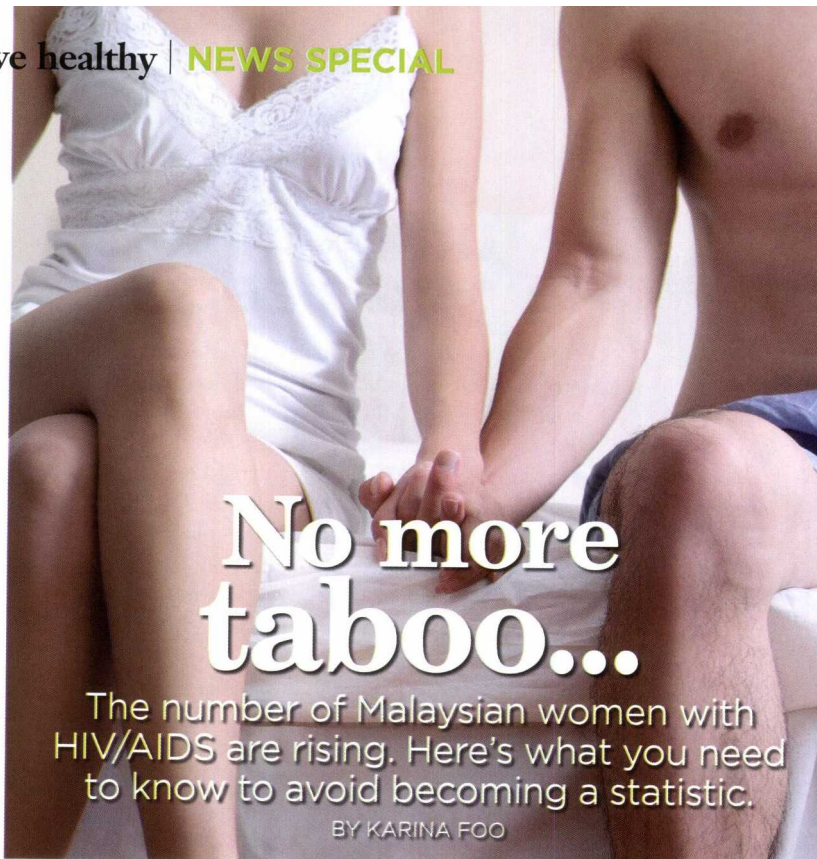


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No more taboo...

The number of Malaysian women with HIV/AIDS are rising. Here's what you need to know to avoid becoming a statistic.

BY KARINA FOO

We may have a first-hand experience with a disease like cancer, or know someone with diabetes, but many of us probably are not aware of knowing someone with Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). According to the Malaysian AIDS Council (MAC), HIV/AIDS is the taboo subject that it is in our society, it has become the slow and, almost literally, "silent killer" in Malaysia.

In Malaysia, HIV/AIDS is increasingly affecting more married women and their children than it does any of these groups.

We are facing an HIV and AIDS epidemic

The MAC says that currently, there are more than 10 Malaysians who are tested positive for HIV each day. In 2010, the national HIV surveillance system was notified of 3652 new cases of HIV, according to the Diseases Control Division in the Ministry Of Health. Some 1035 cases progressed to AIDS with 904 AIDS-related deaths.

As of December 2010, the total

number of people living with HIV in Malaysia had reached 77,064. In 2010, HIV affecting the male population was 81.7 per cent (2985 people) and females made up the remaining 18.3 per cent (668 people). Out of the 668 HIV positive females, **598 of them were infected by the disease from heterosexual contact.** In 2009 itself, there were nine newly reported cases of HIV each day, with a 7 to 2 ratio of male to female. Among these, six were infected with HIV through shared needles (drug users) while the other three from sexual activity.

How women get HIV

In Malaysia, it is generally assumed that a married woman (or a woman in a monogamous relationship) with a steady job is the least likely to contract HIV. However, the HIV infection trend seems to be shifting into this demographic group due to unprotected heterosexual intercourse. Typically, she is infected by her husband or boyfriend who—unbeknownst to her—has had unprotected sex with another partner, most commonly a sexual worker.

From mother to child

Although rare, since pregnant women who are HIV positive are usually given medication to prevent the foetus from getting infected, it's possible for an HIV-infected mother to pass the virus directly to her foetus before or during birth, or through breast milk. The risk of infection from mother to child can be reduced by 30 per cent with Anti-Retroviral Therapy (ART) for the mother.

The MAC suggests:

☞ TOTALLY ABSTAINING FROM

SEX: It's the sure way to void sexually transmitted diseases and reduce the risk of an HIV infection.

☞ **IF YOU'RE GOING TO HAVE SEX, DO IT RESPONSIBLY:** Asking or suggesting to have safe sex shouldn't be perceived as being suspicious of your partner's loyalty. It's your right and responsibility to ask your partner to use a condom.

☞ **KNOW THE TYPE OF CONDOM**

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FOR MAXIMUM PROTECTION:

Male and female condoms are used to protect against STIs and used with other forms of contraception to improve contraceptive effectiveness. However, condoms with the spermicide, nonoxynol-9 is not recommended for effectively

preventing Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) and HIV.

➤ MOVE ON: Does your partner refuse to use condoms even when you insist? It may be time to reconsider the person you're with, especially if he doesn't have any regard for your health and safety.

PHOTO: INMAGINE.COM

HIV/AIDS: THE BASICS

As its name suggests, HIV is an infection that kills the body's immune cells, weakening the immune system over time. AIDS develops at the stage of advanced HIV. It is transmitted through the exchange of bodily fluids, such as semen, vaginal secretions or blood (including menstrual blood), from a person living with HIV to his partner. HIV can infect through mucous membranes directly or enter through cuts and sores caused during intercourse and, most of the time, imperceptibly.