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Females are more vulnerable to HIV infection

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PUTATAN: Females are two to four times vulnerable to HIV infection compared with males, the Seminar on Women's Health: HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD), the State Health Department's Principal Assistant Director (AIDS/STD), Dr Khamisah Awang Lokman cited biological and social factors as the reason.

In her presentation on Women's Health: HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD), the State Health Department's Principal Assistant Director (AIDS/STD), Dr Khamisah Awang Lokman cited biological and social factors as the reason.

"During sexual intercourse, semen that is HIV-infected goes into the female genitals. Being the receiving partner, the tissue in the genitals gets torn easily compared with the condition in the male partner. As a result, it is easier for the virus to enter the bloodstream of the female.

"In addition, the surface area of the vaginal mucosa (that is, the deep folds of mucous membrane that line the vagina) is wider and thus easily exposed to infection in the genitals," she explained.

According to Dr Khamisah, women who are infected with a sexually transmitted disease (STD) may not be aware of it because usually there are no symptoms in the early stage.

"Hence, if there is some vaginal discharge, women may take it lightly and don't seek treatment. What they don't realise is that such discharge could be due to an underlying disease (for example, STD). Therefore, if left untreated, the condition is vulnerable to HIV infection," she cautioned.

On the social factor that contributes to vulnerability, Dr Khamisah said generally, women with a low socio-economic status have little or no say in issues relating to sexual relations.

"As such, sexuality is determined by their male counterparts. Given their dependence on men, they cannot voice out in ensuring safe sex."

Another contributory factor is poverty which drives women and girls into becoming sex workers



Dr Khamisah

and exposing themselves to danger.

Meanwhile, Dr Khamisah explained the UNAIDS' campaign to prevent HIV transmission through sexual relations.

"It is called the 'ABC' approach. 'A' represents Abstinence (refrain from sex entirely) or delaying the first sex as long as possible. 'B' means Being safer by being faithful to one partner or by reducing the number of sexual

partners. 'C' stands for Correct and consistent use of condoms for sexually active young people, couples in which one partner is HIV-positive, sex workers and their clients, as well as anyone engaging in sexual activity with partners who may have been at risk of HIV exposure."

UNAIDS is the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS. Its mission is to lead, strengthen and support an expanded response to HIV and AIDS that includes preventing transmission of HIV, providing care and support to those already living with the virus, reducing the vulnerability of individuals and communities to HIV and alleviating the impact of the epidemic.

Answering a question, Dr Khamisah said the younger people are when they become sexually active, the higher the lifetime risk for contracting an STD. "The risk also increases with the number of sexual partners." Women at the seminar also wondered why the Health Ministry was promoting the use of male latex condoms, instead of both the male and female condoms.

The seminar was organised by the Sabah Women's Advisory Council (MPWS) Health Committee with the co-operation of the State Health Department.

Also present were the State Health Department's Public Health Physician, Dr Maria Suleiman, Penampang Health Clinic's Medical Officer, Dr Jeklin Sominding and Dr Shariffah Rohaya Syed Abu Bakar, a member of MPWS Health Committee.