

HIV language and terminology

Reference Paper



Language and terminology related to HIV and AIDS often includes acronyms and technical terms, some of which change over time as knowledge and understanding develops. This resource is intended to provide definitions and descriptions of current usage of terms with explanations of their appropriateness. It is not exhaustive and further resources are suggested. It begins with some frequently used abbreviations and acronyms. Although these abbreviations are frequently used, some of them are no longer preferred. The next section provides guidance on currently preferred terminology.

Frequently used abbreviations and acronyms

AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome	NAC	National AIDS Council/Commission
ANC	Antenatal care	NAP	National AIDS Plan
ART	Antiretroviral therapy	NAPC	National AIDS Prevention and Control
ARV	Antiretroviral	NSP	National Strategic Plan
CABA	Children affected by AIDS	NSP	Needle syringe programme
CSW	Commercial sex worker	OI	Opportunistic infections
DHS	Demographic and health survey	OVC	Orphans and vulnerable children
GIPA	Greater Involvement of People living with or affected by HIV and AIDS	PEP	Post-exposure prophylaxis
HAART	Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy	PLHIV	People living with HIV
HBC	Home-based care	PLWHA	People living with HIV and/or AIDS
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus	PMTCT	Prevention of mother to child transmission
IDU	Injecting drug user	PPTCT	Prevention of parent to child transmission
IEC	Information, education and communication	PTCT	Parent to child transmission
MARP	Most-at risk population	SRH	Sexual and reproductive health
MCH	Mother and child health	STI	Sexually transmitted infection
MIPA	Meaningful involvement of people living with or affected by HIV and AIDS	SW	Sex workers
MSM	Men who have sex with men	TB	Tuberculosis
		VCCT	Voluntary confidential counselling and testing
		VCT	Voluntary counselling and testing

Current terminology and preferred usage

In general, avoid terms with judgement, aim for accuracy. Avoid labels for people, instead describe behaviour, and avoid sensationalist language. Language and terminology changes over time, so check regularly for the latest preferred usage.

<i>Terms which are problematic or should be used with caution</i>	<i>Explanation</i>	<i>Preferred terms</i>
AIDS (when HIV is meant)	AIDS is frequently misused when referring to HIV. AIDS is a syndrome – a collection of illnesses which occurs when the immune system is severely weakened because of HIV infection. Not all people living with HIV also have AIDS.	HIV (if referring to HIV) HIV and AIDS (if referring to both HIV and AIDS) AIDS (if referring to AIDS)
AIDs / Aids / aids	AIDS is an acronym and should be written in capitals	AIDS
AIDS orphan	This is a stigmatising label which also creates confusion between children orphaned by AIDS and children infected with HIV. “Children orphaned by AIDS” is preferred if it is necessary to distinguish between these children and other orphaned or vulnerable children.	Orphans and other vulnerable children Children orphaned by AIDS Orphans due to AIDS

AIDS patient HIV patient Patient	The term patient is used by medical staff in clinical settings. Outside of this, the term “patient” can imply a continual state of illness and can be demoralising.	Person living with HIV Person with HIV HIV-positive person
AIDS prevention	AIDS is a syndrome, which develops as a result of immune deficiency. HIV is a transmittable infection. Therefore HIV prevention aims to prevent the transmission of the infection.	HIV prevention
AIDS test	A test for AIDS does not exist. It is diagnosed based on a person having a range of symptoms. A person can be tested for HIV antibodies.	HIV test
AIDS victim/sufferer	These terms imply powerlessness and lack of control over one’s life.	Person with HIV Person living with HIV
AIDS virus	AIDS is a syndrome. HIV is a virus that causes AIDS.	HIV
Body fluids	This refers to any fluids made by the body. Only certain body fluids may contain significant concentrations of HIV: Blood, Semen, Breast milk, Peritoneal fluid, Amniotic fluid	Refer to the specific body fluids as appropriate
CABA/OVC	These abbreviations are for “children affected by AIDS” and “orphans and vulnerable children”. Writing them out in full is preferred to assigning abbreviations and acronyms to people.	Orphans and other vulnerable children Children affected by HIV Children affected by AIDS
Contamination vs infection	Material objects are contaminated, people are infected.	Contamination when referring to objects Infection when referring to people
Drug abuser Drug addict Junkie	Labels of people which include judgement. Many people who use drugs do not consider themselves abusers or addicts. These terms alienate and stigmatise them. The use of contaminated injecting equipment can cause HIV transmission, not the drug use itself.	Injecting drug user (IDU) Persons affected by drug use Drug users Active drug users Recovering drug users
Drugs (when referring to medication)	Avoid confusion between prohibited drugs and medication.	Medication ART HIV treatment medication
Dying of AIDS	This phrase should be used with caution and only when referring to someone in the last days of their life. Having AIDS does not mean that someone is dying, so it is inappropriate to use this term to refer to all people with HIV. “Living with HIV” is promoted to encourage the best possible mental health of people living with HIV and those around them. The same approach is taken for people living with cancer, or survivors of assault.	Living with HIV (when referring to some with HIV)
Dying or died of AIDS	Because AIDS is a syndrome not a disease, people die of opportunistic infections or AIDS-related illnesses.	Died of an AIDS-related illness To die of an AIDS-related illnesses
Epidemic vs pandemic	Epidemic is a disease that spreads rapidly through a segment of the population (e.g. a geographical location or an age group). It can be the result of an infection transmitted person to person, or from a contaminated source (e.g. water or food). A pandemic is a disease that is prevalent throughout a country, continent or the whole world.	Epidemic or Pandemic (according to the relevant context in which they are used)

Female genital mutilation	Labels of practices which include judgment. More neutral terms can increase opportunities for discussion and debate.	Female genital cutting Female circumcision
Full blown AIDS	This phrase implies varying stages of having AIDS. AIDS is a syndrome defined by a person having AIDS-defining illnesses such as an opportunistic infections.	AIDS
Gay (homosexual)	The term "gay" should only be used for individuals or groups who self-identify with having a "gay identity". In many countries homosexuality is taboo and/or illegal and many men would not refer to themselves as gay. Further "gay" usually refers to men. The broader community of homosexual men and women and transsexuals should be described as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered.	Gay and lesbian Men who have sex with men (when addressing male individuals) Same-sex relationships
High(er) risk group/ Groups with high(er) risk behaviours	These terms should be used with caution. They can stigmatise groups of people. And they de-emphasise the behaviour that carries higher risk; people in the general population who do not categorise themselves as part of "higher risk groups" may develop a false sense of their own susceptibility to HIV infection.	High risk behaviour (unprotected sex, use of contaminated needles, etc.) Highly-affected communities Key populations Key populations at higher risk
HIV illness/disease	Neither term is incorrect but should be used appropriately.	HIV infection (when referring to the infection) HIV disease (when referring to the consequences of the HIV infection)
HIV virus	The abbreviation HIV includes "virus" so there is no need to add the word again	HIV
HIV/AIDS	HIV/AIDS is a popular term and preferred by some people living with HIV. Others prefer to separate HIV and AIDS out, to emphasise that they are not the same. It is a useful abbreviation for referring to both HIV and AIDS, but should not be used when referring only to HIV or only to AIDS.	HIV/AIDS (if referring to both HIV and AIDS) HIV and AIDS HIV (if referring to HIV) AIDS (if referring to AIDS)
Incidence rates	The term incidence refers to a rate: the number of <i>new</i> HIV infections in a given population over a given amount of time (not to be confused with prevalence which includes all infections not only new infections).	Incidence
Innocent victim	Labels of people which include judgement and increase stigma, both for a person described as a "victim", and conversely implies that others are not "innocent". It is often used in relation to people who are infected with HIV through medical procedures, or to children infected with HIV in the womb, during childbirth or through breastfeeding	People with medically acquired HIV (e.g., through transfusion, health care providers infected during work, etc.) Children living with HIV HIV-positive people People living with HIV
PLWHIV/PLWHA	Abbreviations of people are to be avoided because they risk dehumanising people	Person/people living with HIV Person/people with HIV Person/people living with AIDS Person/people with AIDS
Prevalence rates	The term prevalence refers to a rate: the measure of the proportion of people in a population infected with a particular disease at a given time (not to be confused with incidence which refers to new infections only).	Prevalence

Promiscuous	Judgemental and stigmatising adjective.	Having multiple partners
Prostitute	Judgement and stigmatising term which does not recognise that sex is a form of work for some people.	Sex worker (also seen as 'commercial sex worker' or 'brothel-based sex worker')
Terminal disease	AIDS is not necessarily a terminal illness (neither is it a disease). Treatments for HIV and opportunistic infections exist and many people can stay healthy or return to health for long periods.	Life-threatening illness
To catch AIDS To contract AIDS To catch HIV	AIDS is not transmittable. People can become infected with HIV.	To become infected with HIV To contract HIV
Vulnerable groups	"Key populations" is preferred because it focuses less on vulnerability, and refers to sub-groups of the general population who can play an important role in the response to HIV and AIDS.	Key populations Key populations at particular risk of HIV infection Key populations vulnerable to HIV Target groups
Youth	Young people aged 15-24 according to the UN.	Young people Young women and men
Youth vs. Children vs. Adolescents vs. Teenagers	The age ranges of these categories can overlap, depending on the preferred terminology of the user, whether at national or UN level. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child purposefully defines children as people under the age of 18 regardless of national definitions and those of various UN agencies. The age ranges and terminology suggested in the next column are frequently used.	Children (aged 14 and under) Adolescents (aged 10-19, according to WHO) Teenagers (aged 13-19) Young women and men/young people (aged 15-24) Young adults (aged 20-24)

Resources

UNAIDS Terminology Guidelines, 2008

Includes: a summary of important preferred terminology and errors to avoid; commonly used terms, acronyms and abbreviations; and a list of further resources.

(20 pages pdf 327 KB)

UNESCO Guidelines on Language and Content in HIV and AIDS, 2006

Includes: main language and terminology considerations; the 'ABC' of combination HIV prevention; harm reduction and HIV; and Annex of Glossary of HIV and AIDS Terms.

(60 pages pdf 1,088 KB)

HIV/AIDS Glossary of Terms

UNESCO, FRESH (Focusing Resources on Effective School Health)

Definitions for vocabulary commonly used to discuss HIV and AIDS. Designed for teachers to simplify and clarify the language used in learning materials and presentations about HIV and AIDS.

(6 pages pdf 323 KB)

Glossary of HIV/AIDS Related Terms, HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service (ATIS)

Extremely comprehensive glossary of clinical HIV terms.

(72 pages pdf 599 KB)

A Guide to HIV/AIDS Epidemiological and surveillance terms Canadian AIDS Society (CAS) and Health Canada

For AIDS service organisations without a background in epidemiology or research. Contains a detailed catalogue of epidemiological and surveillance terminology, and responses to Frequently Asked Questions about epidemiology and HIV/AIDS surveillance reporting.

(98 pages pdf 763 KB)

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