



ADOLESCENTS AND AIDS: A SURVEY OF KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDES AND BELIEFS ABOUT AIDS IN CHENNAI

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ABSTRACT

Aim and Objective: The aim of this study is to assess the adolescents' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about AIDS among young adults in Chennai. The objective of this study is to make aware and provide knowledge about high-risk behaviours associated with AIDS virus infection and help prevent the spread of disease in this population.

Materials and Methods: A survey was done to find out the knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about AIDS among adolescence. A pretested questionnaire containing 20 questions, is divided into a section of knowledge and section of attitudes and beliefs about AIDS was prepared for the students to fill up. 190 students, both male and female from Saveetha Dental College and Saveetha School of Law were assessed through the questionnaire. The questionnaires were directly distributed to the subjects online and completed immediately. The subjects are between the age of 17 to 24 years old.

Results: There was marked variability in knowledge across informational items, particularly about the precautionary measures to be taken during sexual intercourse which may reduce the risk of infection.

Conclusion: Development and implementation of school health educational programs on AIDS and other sexually transmitted disease are needed in this population.

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INTRODUCTION

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a disease without borders and this disease has already assumed pandemic proportions. It has been reported that there are at least 3.86 million HIV positive patients and 12,000 full-blown AIDS cases in India. [1] Of these cases, more than 40 percent of the patients under 25 years of age, thus, this disease is mainly a problem of the young adults. Adolescence is a critical period of great physical change, mental and emotional turmoil. In search of their identity, teenagers very often start experimenting with intravenous drugs or sex, both making them vulnerable to contracting AIDS. Many adolescents are less likely to be aware of AIDS and the modes of its spread.

AIDS is rare among adolescents[2] but despite, this should not be grounds for neglecting preventive health education in school systems. Epidemiologic data on the use of drugs and the spread of other sexually transmitted diseases (STD) among this population suggest that the rate of disease transmission may far exceed its reported rate,[2-7] and that STDs and adolescents drug use are the most persuasive, destructive, and costly health problems confronting adolescents today.

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Knowledge about high-risk behaviours associated with AIDS virus infection could help prevent the spread of disease in this population.

One distributed report proposes that the secondary school understudies did not have a lot of data about AIDS nor were many worried about the risk of AIDS.[8] The findings, in any case, depend on a moderately little example (n=250), and reflect a geographic area of the United States which has a low incidence of AIDS. The present study reports a survey of adolescents' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about AIDS in Chennai.

METHODS

The project involves administering a newly developed self-report questionnaire, consisting of 20 questions (Figure 1) which evaluated the students' attitudes and beliefs regarding personal susceptibility, disease severity, and the need for AIDS instruction to be included in school curricula.

The questionnaire is divided into two sections. Section A requires the participants to answer a series of 13 questions which are related to the knowledge of the participants regarding AIDS. Section B includes 7 questions which assess the attitudes and beliefs of participants about AIDS. Students were requested to give "True", "False" or "Don't Know" responses to questions in Section A, and "Yes", "No" or

“Don’t Know” responses to questions in Section B. The questionnaire was conducted online using Survey Planet (surveyplanet.com).

A total of one hundred and ninety students, which includes one hundred and twenty-five students of Saveetha Dental College, Chennai, who were in their 1st year, 2nd year and 3rd year at the college and sixty-five students of Saveetha School of Law, Chennai, who were in their 1st year and 2nd year, were asked to complete the questionnaire of 20 questions. The subject comprised of 67 males (40-dental, 27-law) and 123 females (85-dental, 38-law) with a median age of 19 years (range of 17-22 years). All questionnaire were completely anonymous; they were distributed online and completed by the participants within 2 days after distribution.

aware that "use of a condom during sexual intercourse may lower the risk of getting the disease." This large discrepancy suggests that many adolescents, while knowing a major route of disease transmission, nonetheless, will be engaging in unprotected sexual activity.

Most adolescents were aware that receiving infected blood from a transfusion and sharing intravenous drug needles (84 per cent) were also identified routes of disease transmission. On the other hand, only 60 per cent of students surveyed were aware that AIDS could not be spread by using someone's

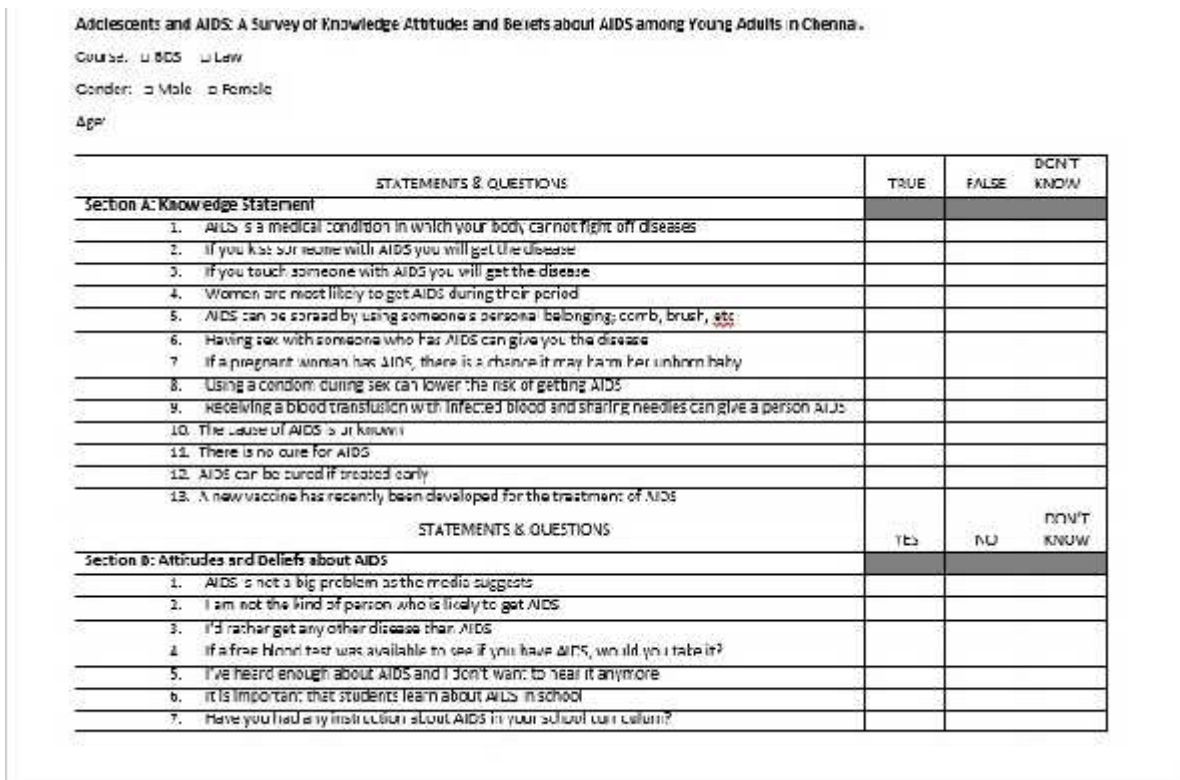


Figure 1 Questionnaire on Knowledge, Attitudes and Beliefs about AIDS among Young Adults which consists of 20 questions

RESULTS

The findings suggest that students possess some knowledge of AIDS-although this knowledge is uneven (see Table 1). With respect to disease transmission, 91 per cent of the students correctly indicated that "sexual intercourse was one mode of contracting AIDS," however, only 42 per cent were

personal belongings and only 68 per cent knew that engaging in casual contact (i.e., shaking hands) would not lead to contracting the disease.

Moreover, less than half the students (46 per cent) correctly reported that kissing was not a route of AIDS transmission. Adolescents were less informed with respect to the treatment

Table 1 Subject Responses for Each Knowledge Statement

Statements & Questions	True (%)	False (%)	Don't Know (%)
1. AIDS is a medical condition in which your body cannot fight off diseases	144 (75.8)	21 (11.0)	25 (13.2)
2. If you kiss someone with AIDS you will get the disease	74 (38.9)	87 (45.8)	29 (15.3)
3. If you touch someone with AIDS you will get the disease	33 (17.4)	129 (67.9)	28 (14.7)
4. Women are most likely to get AIDS during their period	35 (18.4)	91 (47.9)	64 (33.7)
5. AIDS can be spread by using someone's personal belonging; comb, brush, etc.	46 (24.2)	113 (59.5)	31 (16.3)
6. Engaging in a sexual intercourse with someone who has AIDS can give you the disease	173 (91.0)	6 (3.2)	11 (5.8)
7. If a pregnant woman has AIDS, there is a chance it may harm her unborn baby	155 (81.6)	13 (6.8)	22 (11.6)
8. Using a condom during sex can lower the risk of getting AIDS	80 (42.1)	36 (20.5)	19 (10.0)
9. Receiving a blood transfusion with infected blood and sharing needles can give a person AIDS	161 (84.7)	13 (6.8)	16 (8.4)
10. The cause of AIDS is unknown	77 (40.5)	54 (28.4)	59 (31.1)
11. There is no cure for AIDS	98 (51.6)	32 (16.8)	60 (31.6)
12. AIDS can be cured if treated early	61 (32.1)	70 (36.8)	59 (31.1)
13. A new vaccine has recently been developed for the treatment of AIDS	43 (22.6)	59 (31.1)	88 (46.3)

of AIDS. Surprisingly, only 31 per cent and 36.8 per cent, respectively, were aware that "no new vaccine was available for treating AIDS" nor "could AIDS be cured if treated early," and only 51.6 per cent reported that "AIDS could not be cured."

With respect to adolescents' attitudes and beliefs about AIDS (Table 2), 81.6 per cent of the adolescents report "AIDS is a big problem as the media suggested" and 43.7 per cent report being "unlikely to contract the disease." Over half the adolescents surveyed (51.1 per cent) would rather contract "any other disease than AIDS." Less than half of the adolescence surveyed (45.7 per cent) report "have had instruction about AIDS in the school curriculum." One attitude which was most persuasive (87.6 per cent agreeing), was that it is important to receive AIDS instruction in the school curriculum.

Table 2 Subject Responses for Attitudes and Beliefs about AIDS

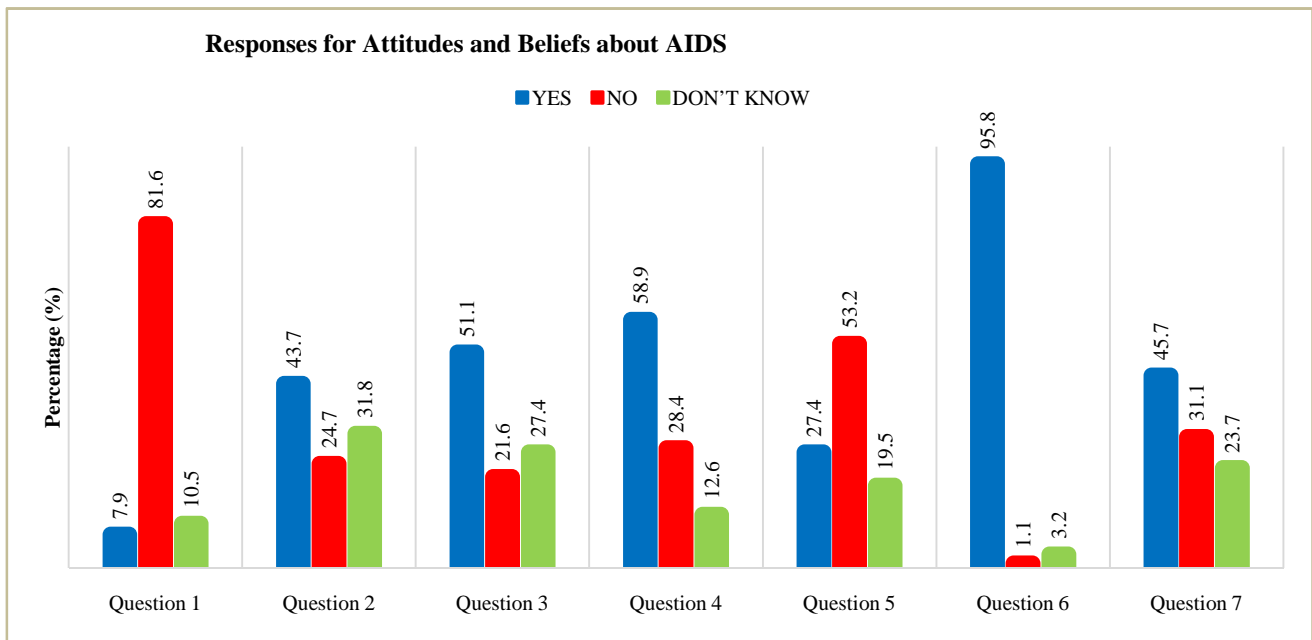
Statements & questions	Yes	No	Don't know
1. AIDS is not a big problem as the media suggests	15 (7.9)	155 (81.6)	20 (10.5)
2. I am not the kind of person who is likely to get AIDS	83 (43.7)	47 (24.7)	60 (31.8)
3. I'd rather get any other disease than AIDS	97 (51.1)	41 (21.6)	52 (27.4)
4. If a free blood test was available to see if you have AIDS, would you take it?	112 (58.9)	54 (28.4)	24 (12.6)
5. I've heard enough about AIDS and I don't want to hear it anymore	52 (27.4)	101 (53.2)	37 (19.5)
6. It is important that students learn about AIDS in school	182 (95.8)	2 (1.1)	6 (3.2)
7. Have you had any instruction about AIDS in your school curriculum?	86 (45.7)	59 (31.1)	45 (23.7)

world's HIV cases were in their 20s, which clearly indicated that they have acquired it during the period of adolescents.[10] In 1992, the World Health Organization advocated utilizing young children and adolescents as a potential resource for prevention of HIV transmission.

As reported by Price, et al.,[8]which suggested that geographic proximity to a high density AIDS epicentre has a great deal of saliency for what students know and the attitudes and beliefs they possess about AIDS, in which the findings is in stark contrast to the report. The finding from the survey shows that there is a need for education on AIDS to be included in the school curricula to overcome and prevent misconception about AIDS and this education would be preferably be treated as any other lesson and not to be provided in isolation. This teaching plan is conducted to feed knowledge about communicable diseases, in general, to students. Equally important as understanding the cause and transmission of AIDS, as Yankauer points out, is providing education on the role that social values play in the control of sexually transmitted diseases.[11] As the projected epidemic of AIDS cases and HTLV-III infection continue to escalate,[12] increased attention must be directed at the adolescent population, which has heretofore been neglected, if in the long run we are to curtail the spread of disease in this population.HIV do occur as 4.9% in young individuals (11 to 20 years) [13] (<http://www.jaypeejournals.com/eJournals/ShowText.aspx?ID=817&Type=FREE&TYP=TOP&IN=~eJournals/images/JPLOGO.gif&IID=75&isPDF=YES>)

CONCLUSION

The present study shows a good but unsatisfying picture of AIDS awareness among the urban, educated adolescents, which indirectly points out to much less awareness among the rural, illiterate counterparts.



DISCUSSION

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS-2), 1998-99 reported that the age group of 15-19 forms a sizeable portion of India's population, which is approximately 22% .[9] A study conducted in 1991 reported that 25 percent of the

The widespread ignorance about AIDS among adolescents is serious matter and needs to be addressed appropriately through intensive AIDS awareness campaigns in all the high and higher secondary schools of the state. Development and implementation of school health educational programs on

AIDS and other sexually transmitted disease are needed in this population.

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