



U.S. Agency for International Development

Bureau for Global Health

COUNTRY PROFILE

HIV/AIDS

ERITREA

Eritrea's first AIDS case was recognized in 1988. Although the country's reported HIV/AIDS epidemic remains at an early stage, in 2001, AIDS was the second-leading cause of death among Eritrean hospital patients older than 5 years. According to UNAIDS, at the end of 2001, an estimated 55,000 people were living with HIV/AIDS, yielding an adult prevalence of 2.8 percent, although the National AIDS Control Program estimates approximately 60,000 to 70,000 Eritreans are currently living with the disease.

Estimated Number of Adults and Children Living with HIV/AIDS (end 2001)	55,000
Total Population (2001)	3.8 million
Adult HIV Prevalence (end 2001)	2.8%
HIV-1 Seroprevalence in Urban Areas	
Population most at risk (i.e., sex workers and clients, patients seeking care for a sexually transmitted infection, or others with known risk factors)	24.1%
Population not at risk (i.e., pregnant women, blood donors, or others with no known risk factors)	2.2%

Sources: UNAIDS, U.S. Census Bureau

Approximately 70 percent of reported AIDS cases occur among adults aged 20 to 39, while approximately 5 percent occur in children under age 15, mostly via mother-to-child transmission. Heterosexual transmission is believed to account for up to 90 percent of HIV infections. The majority of reported AIDS cases (98 percent) have been found in the urban centers of Asmara, Assab, and Massawa. The Ministry of Health reported that in 1999 in Asmara alone, 386 children were orphaned due to AIDS. By the end of 2001, an estimated 24,000 Eritrean children had lost one or both parents to AIDS.

In 2002, Eritrea's Ministry of Health released the results of the first nationwide HIV prevalence survey. The study reported that in 2001, approximately 4.6 percent of soldiers and 22.8 percent of female bar workers were HIV-positive.

The 2002 survey also found that 99 percent of respondents reported they had heard of HIV/AIDS. Despite this awareness and a correspondingly high concern about the threat of HIV, respondents reported a low perception of personal risk. Seventy-two percent of those surveyed thought they were at no risk for contracting HIV. Women were more likely than men to report having no risk for infection, although more than 56 percent of women surveyed reported their husbands or partners had more than one sexual partner. High percentages of bar workers (60 percent) and soldiers (62 percent) also believed they were not at risk for infection.



Map of Eritrea: PCL Map Collection, University of Texas

According to UNAIDS, Eritrea could face a rapid expansion of HIV/AIDS in the next few years. Reasons for concern include the planned demobilization of almost 200,000 soldiers and an eventual reopening of borders that were closed during the 1998–2000 war with neighboring Ethiopia, which has the third-largest number of

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persons living with HIV/AIDS in the world. UNAIDS also cites internal population displacement in the wake of the conflict and economic vulnerability as concerns.

National Response

Eritrea developed its first five-year plan for HIV/AIDS control in 1997, and the Ministry of Health has taken the lead in developing an intersectoral resource mobilization plan for HIV/AIDS prevention, which is expected to complement the social marketing program.

In 2001, Eritrea signed a \$40 million credit agreement with the World Bank to establish the HIV/AIDS, Malaria, Sexually Transmitted Infections, and Tuberculosis (HAMSET) Project. The HAMSET Project was launched by President Isaias when he spoke to the nation for the first time about the threat of HIV. The project has already financed the construction of a new national blood bank in Asmara, and it supports voluntary counseling and testing for HIV in 20 hospitals around the country. A life-skills curriculum for schools that will include HIV/AIDS education is being planned.

Several smaller projects have been developed to assist the growing number of Eritreans living with HIV/AIDS and to prevent the further spread of HIV. For example, Norwegian Church Aid supports a program of the Eritrean Evangelical Church to help women escape prostitution. In cooperation with the United Nations Population Fund and the Royal Danish Embassy, the Eritrean Ministry of Health encourages community care and support for people living with HIV/AIDS. Implemented by Eritrean faith-based and community organizations, the Community-Based HIV/AIDS Care and Support: Mobilizing the Civil Society of Eritrea Project will provide basic nursing training to volunteers so they may offer home-care services to people living with HIV/AIDS.

The Eritrean government and nongovernmental organizations are using innovative methods to reach the population with HIV prevention messages, such as involving well-known sports and entertainment personalities in television and radio campaigns; developing nationwide poster campaigns; and implementing educational projects in schools, youth clubs, and camps for internally displaced people.

The Ministry of Health is working to improve medical treatment for people living with HIV/AIDS. For example, a pilot program to introduce antiretroviral drugs for the prevention of mother-to-child transmission of HIV was scheduled to begin in 2003.

USAID Support

USAID allocated \$1.8 million to HIV/AIDS activities in Eritrea in 2002, up from \$1.5 million in 2001. Although the country's HIV/AIDS prevalence is still relatively low compared with that of other countries in the region, prevalence could increase rapidly due to the large number of Eritrean troops scheduled to be demobilized from the border conflict with Ethiopia.

In addition, more than 1 million Eritreans were displaced by a military offensive in May 2000. Given this high-risk situation and early recognition of the threat by the Government of Eritrea, USAID/Eritrea is rapidly expanding support from condom social marketing to other aspects of HIV/AIDS prevention and care.

USAID supports the following programs:

Advocacy

USAID's Africa Bureau sent a specialist in 2000 to reinforce Ministry of Health efforts to involve religious leaders in the fight against HIV/AIDS. USAID also arranged for Eritrea to be represented at the December 2000 White House Summit of Religious Leaders on HIV/AIDS. In 2001, Eritrea's three main Christian denominations and the Muslim community organized the first interfaith National Worship Day to commemorate World AIDS Day. USAID has worked closely with UNAIDS and U.S. Embassy public affairs staff to promote HIV/AIDS awareness through study tours and presentations.

In collaboration with UNAIDS, USAID sponsored an Ambassadors of Hope Mission in November 2000 through which Ugandan HIV activists met with thousands of Eritreans, from cabinet ministers to front-line military troops, to alert them to the threat of HIV/AIDS.

Behavior change communication

USAID/Eritrea has supported extensive training and formative research to develop mass media communications, peer education, youth theater productions, and counseling to prevent and reduce the stigma associated with HIV/AIDS. These activities include mobile video unit presentations in remote villages, concerts, dramatic performances, school debate events, and essay contests.

Through the Eritrean Social Marketing Group, USAID supports HIV/AIDS information, education, and communication campaigns in Eritrea's four largest camps for internally displaced persons and in military camps and barracks.

Care and support

USAID/Eritrea sponsored consultations by experts living with AIDS to establish *Bidho* (Challenge), the first Eritrean association of people living with and most affected by HIV/AIDS. The association conducts workshops, training courses, and support groups to educate people about HIV/AIDS. It also plans to set up an HIV/AIDS information hotline.

A Ministry of Health comprehensive care and support manual was finalized with USAID training and technical support.

Condom social marketing

USAID/Eritrea has supported the national condom social marketing program since 1997. Sales of *Abusalama* condoms were launched in 1998. As of 2002, 13 million condoms had been sold. The Eritrean Social Marketing Group is the first organization permitted to distribute condoms outside of traditional pharmaceutical outlets. This program has made condoms affordable and widely available.

To better reflect the lifestyle and attitudes of young Eritreans, the Eritrean Social Marketing Group redesigned the *Abusalama* package and logo in 2001 with input from Eritrean youth. The condoms were relaunched to the public at a free concert that received extensive media coverage. Condom vending machines were introduced in high-risk locations, such as bars, hotels, and discos. Sales of *Abusalama* condoms increased 25 percent in 2001 as a result of the relaunch.

Voluntary counseling and testing

USAID/Eritrea provided technical support and training to establish voluntary counseling and testing services in 20 hospitals and two voluntary counseling and testing centers. More than 100 counselors have been trained, including trainers of trainers. A testing protocol was revised to ensure same-day test results.

For More Information

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*Prepared for USAID by TvT Global Health and Development Strategies/Social & Scientific Systems, Inc.,
under The Synergy Project.*

For more information, see www.usaid.gov/pop_health/aids/ or www.synergyaids.com.

May 2003

