



Message from

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for the Eastern Mediterranean
on the occasion of
World AIDS Day
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Every year, World AIDS Day is an opportunity to review progress and address challenges in our efforts to end the HIV epidemic. After more than 40 years, HIV continues to affect people's lives. By the end of 2020, AIDS had claimed more than 240 000 lives in the Eastern Mediterranean Region. Ending AIDS by 2030 is a global priority as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is embedded in WHO's regional vision of Health for All by All. Today reminds us all of our commitment to put people's health first despite the many challenges we face.

Our Region faces the fastest-growing HIV epidemic among all WHO regions. It also suffers from the lowest access to testing and treatment. By the end of 2020, only one in four people living with the virus had access to quality care and treatment. The main reason for this is poor access to diagnosis: only 40% of those infected with HIV in the Region know their status.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made it much more difficult to reduce the gaps in HIV diagnosis and treatment. The pandemic disrupted HIV services in many countries. Health resources were redirected to the COVID-19 response. Lockdowns and social distancing measures hindered people's ability to continue to access services safely. In 2020, Member States carried out only a third of the number of HIV tests that they conducted in 2019, and countries that had made tangible progress towards targets experienced setbacks.

HIV testing must remain a priority for all our countries to quickly close the gap. People who know they are living with HIV can access quality care and treatment that enables them to live a normal, healthy life. Treatment suppresses the virus in the body and prevents transmission. People who get tested and who are negative can also seek a variety of prevention services, which can protect them from HIV. Our testing strategies need to be guided by the context and nature of the epidemics we face. In our Region, HIV affects certain key populations much more than others. This is where we need to focus our outreach to scale up testing.

To reach key populations, we need creative approaches. HIV testing is available mostly through public health facilities and nongovernmental organizations. Encouragingly, community-based testing programmes are operating in more and more countries. HIV programmes and community organizations must work hand in hand to effectively reach out, diagnose people living with HIV, and link them to care.

This year's World AIDS Day campaign is using social media to encourage people to get tested. WHO and UNAIDS are calling jointly for an HIV testing month. We need stigma-free HIV testing services in every country. Integrating testing services within essential service packages and within primary health care services can increase access.

I call on ministries of health and civil society organizations to facilitate testing so that people can know their HIV status. WHO stands ready to assist you. With this HIV testing month, let us renew our commitment to end AIDS as a public health threat by 2030 and achieve our regional vision of health for all by all.

Get back on track.
Focus on outreach and testing.

