



What every teen needs to know about HIV

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HIV awareness month: What every teen must know

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BY PATRICK SSENTONGO

December arrived, and with it came the longest school holiday of the year—stretching across December to January, and possibly even longer because of the tension expected around 2026 General Election.

For most of you, this sounds like the best news ever: long mornings in bed, no prep, no bells, no roll call, and no teachers chasing you here and there.

But behind the excitement is a quieter truth that many young people never talk about. This long stretch at home—especially for Senior Four and Senior Six vacists who will be out of school for months—comes with risks that are very real, very present, and, as data shows, increasingly dangerous.

December is also HIV/AIDS Awareness Month, a time when Uganda joins the entire world to put out a call on every citizen to reflect on how HIV continues to impact lives. But the most urgent reality sits with young people. Teens today are growing up in a world where HIV/AIDS is no longer the terrifying death sentence it once was. Treatment is better, people are living longer and healthier lives, and the messaging around HIV is less dramatic than it was in the early 2000s. Yet the numbers tell a different story—one that brings the spotlight right back on young people, especially young girls, who continue to face the highest vulnerability.

And so, as holidays begin, as you step out of uniforms and step into free time and freedom, the big question that arises is: Are teens truly safe during the long holiday—especially when HIV risk continues to surround them more than most are willing to admit?

A holiday much longer—and riskier than usual

Every year, you all look forward to this third term holiday because it is long, relaxing, and full of family time. Senior Four leavers are now entering the famous “vac,” a period that can stretch up to March as they wait for UNEB results and transition into their next academic chapter. Senior Six vacists face an even longer stretch—eight months or more before university admissions. Even low-

er classes, from Senior One upward, are now home for 10–12 full weeks.

It is easy to think this is just another holiday. But these long stretches of idle time come with exposure. With school closed, the structures that protect you—classroom schedules, strict teachers, dormitory routines, early prep, and limited movement disappear overnight. At home, everything changes; you wake up when you want. You spend more time on your phone, on social media, in the neighbourhood, or with peers. You interact with many more people; some safe, some unsafe. You may be around certain adults or relatives whose behaviour is questionable. And in many communities, free time easily turns into pressure, temptation, boredom, wrong company, or unsafe environments.

This is when danger quietly slips in. Every year, during long holidays, reports rise of teens getting involved in risky behaviour—unprotected sex, alcohol, drugs, midnight outings, and encounters with people who take advantage of their vulnerability. Girls, especially those aged 14–19, face the greatest danger. Many are targeted by older men, so-called “blessers, sugar daddies”, family friends, or boys who pressure them into things they are not ready for. And boys, though less talked about, are also pushed into situations they later regret.

All this becomes even more worrying when we consider what Uganda's HIV/AIDS data has been quietly showing for years.

Teens face the highest HIV risk

There is a narrative that HIV is “no longer a big deal.” But for you, as a teenager, this is far from true. Uganda continues to record some of the highest HIV vulnerabilities among adolescents and young people in Africa, and the statistics reveal a reality that many families, schools, and communities rarely confront openly.

Adolescent girls between the ages of 10 and 19 account for nearly 90 per cent of all new HIV infections among young people in Uganda, despite being a smaller population than boys. This is not because girls are reckless, but because society exposes them to more danger. The power imbalance between young girls and older men, transactional and survival sex where girls exchange affection or silence for money or gifts, the pressure to appear mature or “in love,” and unsafe environments in homes and neighbourhoods all play a part.

More concerning is the striking jump in HIV prevalence between ages 15–19 and 20–24. The prevalence rate almost triples, showing that the transition from mid-teens to young adult-

hood is the most dangerous period. And guess who falls right in that age group this holiday? The S.4s and S.6s who have stepped out of school—excited, free, and largely unsupervised.

Another quiet crisis is happening among teens who were born with HIV. Many of them are now in high school, and even more are entering university age. As they try to fit in socially, build friendships, and navigate relationships, they struggle with stigma, secrecy, and the pressure to “appear normal.” Many fear taking medication openly at home. Some skip doses when they travel. Others lose routine because no teacher or health worker is reminding them. During long holidays, treatment interruptions become very common, putting both the teen and their future partners at risk.

And yet, despite all this, HIV testing among teens remains very low. Many young people avoid testing out of fear, shame, or the belief that “I can’t be at risk.” Unfortunately, this belief is what makes the danger even stronger.

Choose safety, protect your future

When school closes, another world opens up. The world of social media, peer pressure, neighbourhood groups, small hangouts, secret gatherings, and friendships that get much closer during holidays. These environments often bring subtle but powerful traps. A cousin who suddenly becomes “too friendly.” A neighbour who always finds a reason to call you over. A boyfriend pushing for sex “just to show you trust him.” A group of friends convincing you that “everyone is doing it.” A stranger offering money, rides, airtime, food, favours, or alcohol.

These traps do not always look dangerous. Sometimes they appear as affection, attention, or excitement. And that is how many teens get pulled into situations that leave them exposed to HIV and other dangers—often without realising how fast it happened.

The truth is, long holidays expose teens to unsupervised interactions, more movement, and more room for risky behaviour. This does not make you “bad.” It makes you human, curious, social, and easily influenced—like every other teenager across the world. But what makes Uganda's context unique is the level of vulnerability created by poverty, unsafe environments, limited parental presence, cultural silence around sexuality, and the lack of youth-friendly spaces where teens can talk openly or seek information without judgment.

This is why HIV Awareness Month matters. And this is why this holiday needs teens: to stay more conscious, more informed, and more protective of your own futures.

This story is not meant to scare you. It is meant to open your eyes to a reality that many of your peers quietly live through. Protecting yourself this holiday does not mean locking yourself indoors or avoiding everyone. It simply means being wiser with your movements, your circles, your time, your decisions, and your boundaries.

It means understanding that your body belongs to you. That you owe nobody access to it. That being young does not make you powerless. That testing is not shameful. That saying no is not rude. That walking away is strength. That your future is worth more than any moment of pressure. This long holiday will test you in many ways—but it can also grow you, strengthen you, and shape your path positively if you remain alert and intentional.

So enjoy it, rest, have fun, spend time with family. Also, explore new things and learn new hobbies.



MUST-KNOW FACTS FOR YOU

- Nearly 90 percent of new HIV infections among adolescents in Uganda are among girls aged 10–19.
- HIV prevalence doubles—and in some cases triples—between ages 15–19 and 20–24.
- Teen testing rates remain extremely low, meaning many do not know their HIV status.
- Long holidays increase cases of assault, unprotected sex, peer pressure, and risky encounters.
- Teens born with HIV face challenges staying on treatment consistently during holidays.
- You have the right to say no, the right to protection, and the right to a healthy future.



The numbers. Girls aged 15–24 have a prevalence rate of around 7.2 percent, nearly double that of their male peers at 4.3 percent, a gap that has remained consistent for years.