

CITY TOPS COUNTRY WITH HIGHEST HIV PREVALENCE RATE AT 14%

FORT PORTAL

By Jonan Tusingwire

Why high HIV rates persist in Fort Portal

Despite several prevention measures and campaigns against HIV and AIDS in the country, the rate at which people in Fort Portal city are contracting the virus leaves a lot to be desired.

Recent statistics from the Uganda AIDS Commission indicate that Fort Portal tops the country with the highest HIV prevalence rate, standing at 14%. The report also shows that the city has a total of 12,500 people living with HIV, while 250 people contracted the virus in 2024 alone.

These figures show that the country's only tourism city has an HIV prevalence rate that is much bigger than the national prevalence rate, which currently stands at 5%.

George William Akora, the executive director of Youth and Women Empowerment Foundation, a non-governmental organisation taking care of youth living with HIV in Fort Portal, said the growing complacency in the fight against HIV and AIDS is contributing to a rise in new infections in Fort Portal, urging renewed vigilance, especially among young people.

He said while medical advancements have significantly improved the quality of life for people living with HIV, the perception that the disease is no longer a threat because treatment is available has led many youth to abandon preventive measures.

"Girls now fear pregnancy more than HIV. That complacency is dangerous," Akora said.

CONDOM MYTHS

Catherine Kemigabo, the Kabarole district health educator, attributed part of



PHOTO BY JONAN TUSINGWIRE

The Fort Portal city deputy resident city commissioner, Emmanuel Businge (second-left), interacts with the youth. Left is Kemigabo. This was during the International Condom Day celebrations in Fort Portal city last week

CULTURAL LEADERS CALL FOR DIALOGUE

Toro kingdom has expressed concern over the rising infections, especially among young people aged 15 to 30.

Nicholus Mugume, the kingdom's minister of youth, said protecting the youth's health requires collective responsibility.

"The health of our youth determines the strength of our kingdom and country. Protecting young people's health is both a personal and collective

responsibility," he said.

Mugume called for the creation of safe spaces where young people can freely ask questions and seek guidance without fear or judgment.

Parents, guardians, cultural and religious leaders were also urged to engage in open and honest conversations with young people about sexual and reproductive health.

"Silence and stigma only increase vulnerability. Honest conversations

build resilience," the minister said.

Mugume said the kingdom pledged to expand youth-friendly health services, support community sensitisation programmes, strengthen partnerships with stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health and civil society organisations. The kingdom will also ensure consistent availability of condoms and sexual reproductive health information.

the problem to misinformation about condoms.

"There is a growing negative attitude towards condom use among some youth; some say condoms cause cancer, others

argue that they reduce pleasure or may get stuck in the body. These myths are putting lives at risk," she said.

Kemigabo also blamed limited parental engagement

in discussing sexual and reproductive health with children, saying silence at home leaves young people vulnerable to peer pressure and misinformation.

FAITH, TRADITIONAL BELIEFS

Officials said reliance on spiritual healing and traditional remedies is also contributing to delayed treatment.

Some religious leaders have

previously been accused of discouraging people living with HIV from taking antiretroviral drugs, urging them instead to rely on prayer for healing.

Last year, authorities in Fort Portal accused pastors of sabotaging the fight against HIV/AIDS by telling people who live with it to embrace prayer instead of medication.

The people living with HIV said some pastors often tell them that God can do miracles and cure them of the disease if they focus on praying rather than taking ARVs.

"Some pastors think HIV can simply go by praying; they should always think before speaking," the then Fort Portal resident city commissioner Stanly Bayole, said.

Evans Amara, the Fort Portal city HIV focal person, said most of the people that resort to prayers rather than medication often come back to the health facilities when the disease has advanced.

FUNDING AND POLICY GAPS

Beyond behavioural factors, experts point to structural barriers affecting condom availability and prevention programming.

Dr Wilson Kazora, the quality improvement manager at AHI Uganda Cares, said although the Government has waived taxes on donated condoms, additional inspection and clearance costs remain a burden to suppliers.

"In a high-burden setting every condom delayed is a prevention lost opportunity," Kazora said, calling for increased domestic funding specifically earmarked for HIV prevention and free public distribution in high-risk communities.

He said condoms remain one of the most affordable and scalable prevention tools available.