

Ethiopia: Spouse Secrecy Fueling HIV/AIDS Spread

In Ethiopia, many married people living with HIV have chosen to keep their HIV status secret even to their spouses, fueling more HIV infections and co-infections.



A mouth infection prompted 36-years old Lula*, a Tuberculosis patient to visit a health facility for treatment. After hours of counseling the doctor advised her to undergo a HIV test.

To her utter shock, she turned positive. She has been under the anti-retroviral treatment (ART) for the last two months.

"I never thought I harbored the virus in my body. I was shocked. I never knew how to live and face the world thereafter," said Lula.

Not knowing what to do next after the pronouncement of her HIV status, she walked straight home but could not tell her family members of her status. She says she knew, it would shock her loving mother as much, so she kept it as a secret.

Lula can't comprehend how and when she contracted the virus. Married and with three children, Lula believed that she could face any problem that she was confronted with in life.

However, her status has proven otherwise. Even then, she appreciates that her HIV status requires behavioral change, so she has chosen to enroll for anti-retroviral therapy (ART).

Her biggest worry though is living a secret, she says she sees no symptoms of HIV on her husband. Because of this she has been very careful on how they have sex as a couple. She says she has not had sex with her husband the last six months.

Nevertheless, she has opted to keep her HIV status a secret. "I fear my

husband might leave me and am not ready to bring up my children alone," she laments.

For the last two months Lula has been taking her drugs in secret and none of her family member, including her husband and children knows of her status.

For Mamitu*, it is the death of her 10-years old son that opened her eyes. She had previously seen her husband take drugs every morning and evening but he never explained that she was taking anti-retroviral drugs and was living with HIV.

"He always told me it[what he was taking the drugs for] was his personal secret," she says. Unfortunately, the husband passed on with the secret.

On getting tested of HIV status at a local hospital, Mamitu tested positive and learnt the cause of her husband's and child's deaths.

"The very drugs I'm taking are what my husband used to but never would let me know of his status," she says.

Reports from health facilities and medical facilities indicate that many married couples on ART are shying away disclose their status to their partners in fear of marriage breakdown.

"I love my wife; she's a good woman, a mother to my children. She's everything. I don't want to lose her," says a 46-years old garage owner living with HIV.

Having been on ART for the last three years, he blames it all on his irresponsible behavior and is very sorry for putting his wife's health at risk.

He has never disclosed to her his HIV status or taken an initiative to use condoms for sexual encounters. Mamitu clearly knows of discordant couples and hides under the illusion that the wife is negative.

"My change to the use of condoms might lead to questioning my faithfulness to her and questioning my HIV status," the man says. Lemma*, a former army tried matters of spirit as an excuse to his idea to use condoms but failed. Frustrated and agonized, he took a desperate decision of abandoning his family.

"I knew my wife would not accept me and my status," he says. Dinku's* family too has a similar story. The husband is HIV positive and on ART that he keenly adheres to. He has also kept it a secret to his wife.

His wife already has distinct HIV symptoms but, the husband observes that it's her responsibility to take initiative and get herself tested.

According to Ato Ashenafi, a HIV and AIDs counselor at Kebena Health Center its stigma and discrimination associated with HIV and AIDs that's prompting patients to keep it a secret to their spouses.

He adds that his facility advices all people who turns up for testing to come with their partners.

Lemma* has a positive story but still finds it hard to disclose his status to his wife. He has gained much weight, 25kgs and his condition has equally improved.

"I better tell my daughter than my wife. She [wife] can mobilize the whole family against me. I prefer to keep it a secret," he says taking all responsibilities.

Health experts have pointed that stigma and discrimination has taken a center stage in fueling the spread of HIV as well as co-infections that prove difficult to manage.