

World Health Organization

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The World Health Organization (WHO) is a specialized agency of the United Nations (UN) that is concerned with international public health. It was established on April 7, 1948, with headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland and is a member of the UN Development Group. The membership of the WHP includes 193 countries and 2 associate members. Six regional committees, located in the Americas, Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, South-East Asia, the Western Pacific, and Africa, focus on regional health concerns.

The WHO's constitution states that its objective "is the attainment by all people of the highest possible level of health". Apart from coordinating international efforts to control outbreaks of infectious disease, such as SARS, malaria, tuberculosis, influenza, and HIV/AIDS, the WHO also sponsors programs to prevent and treat such diseases. The WHO supports the development and distribution of safe and effective vaccines, pharmaceutical diagnostics, and drugs, such as through the Expanded Program on Immunization.

The WHO Disease Staging System for HIV Infection and Disease was first produced in 1990 by the WHO and was updated in September 2005. It can be used in resource-limited settings, is widely used in Africa and Asia, and has been used in research focusing on progression to symptomatic HIV disease. Most of these conditions are opportunistic infections that can be easily treated in healthy people. The staging system is different for adults and adolescents and children.

The WHO published an interim policy on collaborative TB/HIV activities to assist countries in need of immediate guidance to decrease the dual burden of tuberculosis (TB) and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The term interim was used because the evidence was incomplete at that time. Since then, additional evidence has been obtained from randomized controlled trials, observational studies, operational research, and the identification of best practices from programmatic implementation of the collaborative TB/HIV activities recommended by the policy.

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A number of TB and HIV guidelines and policy recommendations have been developed by WHO's Stop TB and HIV/AIDS departments.

Access to evidence-informed HIV prevention, testing and counseling, treatment and care services in low- and middle-income countries has increased and the global incidence of HIV infection is declining in many countries with generalized epidemics. The number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy continues to increase. The WHO Global Health Sector Strategy on HIV/AIDS: Getting to Zero, and the UNICEF's strategic and programmatic focus on equity will emphasize the need to tailor national HIV responses to the local epidemics, to decentralize programs, and to integrate with other health and community services to achieve the greatest impact.

UNAIDS and WHO have established several new targets: zero new infections, zero discrimination and zero AIDS-related deaths. The Global Health Sector Strategy on HIV/AIDS, endorsed by all WHO Member States in May 2011, guides national HIV responses in the health sector and outlines the role of WHO and other partners in achieving targets. The strategy focuses on four strategic directions: optimizing HIV prevention, diagnosis treatment and care; leveraging broader health outcomes through HIV responses; building strong and sustainable health and community systems; and reducing vulnerability and removing structural barriers that impede access to needed services. The prevention of mother-to-child HIV transmission through increased access to antiretroviral therapy and prophylaxis has energized the efforts of UN members to eliminate new infections among children and improve maternal health.

Related Topics: Standard of care, United Nations.

Suggested Resource

World Health Organization. (2007). *Working for health: An introduction to the World Health Organization*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author. Retrieved April 17, 2012 from http://www.who.int/about/brochure_en.pdf

World Health Organization. (2011). *Global health sector strategy on HIV/AIDS 2011–2015*. Geneva, Switzerland: Author. Retrieved April 17, 2012 from http://whqlibdoc.who.int/publications/2011/9789241501651_eng.pdf