

HIV/AIDS Care and Support in the Workplace



Employers' Handbook on Managing HIV/AIDS in the Workplace Book III

Thailand Business Coalition on AIDS (TBCA)
Employers' Confederation of Thailand (ECOT)
International Labour Office (ILO)



Supported by
Joint United Nations Programme
on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)



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HIV/AIDS
Care and Support
in the Workplace



Providing workplace care and support helps to ensure that employees with HIV/AIDS remain healthy and productive at work. In addition, care and support programmes can boost workforce morale by showing that the company is truly concerned about the health and well-being of its employees.

Costs need not be high. Many companies have their own health services in place which can, with a little training, offer counselling and care in relation to HIV/AIDS. Costs can be further reduced by collaborating with community health centres, hospitals and specialized NGOs, including self-help groups of people with HIV/AIDS. Booklet 4, Care and Support Contacts, provides contact information for many of these organizations.

Depending on your company's needs, a care and support programme could include the following:

- Creating a supportive workplace environment, where discrimination is not tolerated and where working conditions are flexible enough to allow workers with HIV/AIDS to remain employed and productive;
- Referral to clinics providing voluntary, confidential counselling and testing;
- Treatment for sexually transmitted diseases (which in turn reduces the risk of HIV infection);
- Prophylaxis and treatment for opportunistic infections related to HIV/AIDS;
- Antiretroviral therapy to help people with HIV/AIDS to stay healthy. (This should only be provided if the company knows it can be maintained in the long term.); and
- Employee and family assistance programmes.

One person within the human resources department or management team should be assigned as a focal point for addressing the workplace needs of employees with HIV/AIDS.



1. Workplace care and support

Every individual's needs for workplace care and support are different. The following guidelines and principles should help in deciding what care and support to provide:

1. Listen to the employee. Negotiate care and support with them and do not dictate!
2. Do not treat employees with HIV/AIDS differently from other employees with a serious illness or condition, in terms of employment and promotion, medical benefits and changes to their work duties and conditions;
3. Create an open, supportive atmosphere between employees and management;
4. Ensure that care and support do not draw attention to the employee with HIV/AIDS and lead to resentment or abuse from co-workers;
5. Hold HIV-positive employees accountable for their assigned work duties. Do not lower your professional expectations just because the employee is HIV-positive. Providing care and support does not mean having to employ unproductive staff;
6. Keep every employee's health status confidential at all times; and
7. Make sure care and support is responsive to the changing needs of the HIV-positive employee over time.

Appropriate workplace care and support for each individual case should be negotiated between the HIV-positive employee, management and employees' representatives (if the employee wants to involve them). To protect confidentiality, as few people as possible should be involved in the process, and the HIV-positive employee's permission should be sought before any new person is involved. The care and support package should be guided by the company's HIV/AIDS policy.

Changes to work duties and conditions

All employees with HIV/AIDS will at some point need some appropriate changes to their work duties and conditions in order that they can keep working productively. Depending on the needs of the HIV-positive employee and the company, the following could be considered as part of the care and support package:

- Flexibility in the work schedule, including time off for healthcare/counselling appointments;
- Reassigning the employee to a less stressful position, with tasks that suit their changing capabilities;
- Providing short-term and/or long-term leave with full or partial pay;
- Creating more part-time positions;
- Moving from commission-based to compensatory salary; and
- Allowing employees to work from home.

Employee and family assistance

An employee with HIV/AIDS will have many concerns outside the workplace. For example, if the employee is in a long-term relationship, it is possible that their partner also has HIV/AIDS. Loss of income and treatment costs might be putting the family under considerable financial pressure. They may be eligible for benefits that they do not know about. There may also be legal concerns, especially about inheritance when a family member dies.

The company should consider helping to address some of these concerns, in order to reduce stress that might affect the employee's health and work, as well as to demonstrate that the company is concerned about its staff's well-being. Employee and family assistance could include:

1. Provision of technical assistance to HIV-positive employees and their families on legal matters, claiming benefits, etc.;
2. Financial assistance to the family;
3. Ensuring that employees with HIV/AIDS do not lose some or all of their health insurance coverage; and
4. Providing prompt notification on continuing health benefits after employment is terminated.

2. What to do when an employee tells you they have HIV/AIDS

If an employee approaches you privately and informs you that they are HIV-positive, your first response should be to provide emotional support and positive reinforcement. When they first learn that they have HIV/AIDS, people have a range of emotional reactions. They may be shocked and disorientated, and even disbelieving. You can help them to get through this emotional crisis. You should not ask them how they contracted HIV, or behave in a way that shows any disapproval or discrimination.

The following should help you to manage the situation effectively:

1. Reassure the employee that they will not be asked to leave work and that all information about their status will be treated as confidential;
2. Ask how the employee learnt of their HIV status-have they actually been tested? If not, suggest that they seek confidential counselling and testing in a health clinic or hospital;
3. Encourage the employee to visit a doctor for professional advice on healthy lifestyle changes, treatment, and fitness for work;
4. Also, encourage the employee to seek professional psycho-social support, for example from self-help groups of people living with HIV/AIDS, and inform them about other services

available for people affected by HIV/AIDS (see Booklet 4, Care and Support Contacts);

5. Negotiate workplace care and support with the employee (see above);



6. Give extra attention to the continued HIV/AIDS education of all staff. Ensure that the HIV status of the employee remains confidential and be vigilant that no discriminatory practices arise at the workplace; and
7. Try to establish an open dialogue with the employee, so that they feel free to come to you for advice and discuss problems and their changing needs inside and outside the workplace.

After the initial emotional crisis (which could take days, months or longer, depending on the person and the support they receive), an employee with HIV/AIDS will usually start to adjust their attitudes and behaviour towards their life and their career. They will be less tense and worried and will start to settle back into their normal work routine. One sign of this may be that they start to take better care of their health and appearance again. The supervisor and co-workers can help this process by integrating them back into normal workplace life, thereby increasing their self-esteem.

In the later stages of HIV/AIDS, employees may have extra needs related to work, such as extra days of sick leave. Make sure workplace care and support responds to these changing needs, within the limits of company policy.

3. Responding to destructive rumours

It sometimes happens that rumours are spread around the workplace that an employee has HIV/AIDS. If the staff are already well educated about HIV/AIDS, the rumours will probably not cause too many problems. In other cases, particularly when the company has no HIV/AIDS policy in place or has not established a programme of workplace HIV/AIDS prevention and education, rumours can seriously disrupt operations, could force managers to make some difficult decisions, and could even lead to the resignation of valuable workers.



When you become aware of such a rumour, your first response should be to try to assess its immediate impact. If it is causing fear and confusion in the workplace, reassure staff that they cannot contract HIV through casual contact and they can continue to work safely. If they are concerned that a member of staff appears to have symptoms of opportunistic infections, tell them that opportunistic infections are only dangerous to people with HIV/AIDS.

Once you know who is responsible for starting and spreading the rumour, find out the reason. It may be that one employee or their partner is visibly sick, and that the employee's co-workers were afraid of HIV infection. Make sure they understand that they are not in danger, but also tell them that spreading this kind of rumour is unacceptable behaviour.

Think carefully about how you should approach the employee who is the subject of the rumour, and whether it is actually necessary to do so. If you approach them too openly, their colleagues will be watching to see what happens next. It will be distressing for the employee and you may find the other staff demanding to know from you whether the employee has HIV/AIDS.

If you do approach the employee, do it in private without alerting the other staff, perhaps even outside the workplace. Do not try to push the employee to tell you whether they have HIV/AIDS—it is the employee's right to keep this confidential, and they will tell you when they are ready. Simply make sure the employee knows what care and support they can expect from the company. If they are clearly sick, encourage them to see a doctor.

You should not ask the employee who has been the subject of the rumours to stop work, even temporarily. This would send the wrong message and is likely to make the employee more distressed. However, if the employee wishes to stay away from work, stress that the company will take action to facilitate their return. If the employee wishes to resign, make sure they take time to consider the decision carefully. You could consider providing assistance to them and their family.

To ensure that similar situations do not arise again, organize an executive briefing on HIV/AIDS for senior management (see Booklet 2, HIV/AIDS Prevention and Education in the Workplace) and encourage the rapid establishment of a company HIV/AIDS committee and HIV/AIDS policy (see Booklet 1, Preparing your Business for the Challenge of HIV/AIDS). Also organize an HIV/AIDS education programme for all employees, so that they are more understanding towards HIV-positive colleagues and know how to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS in the future.

4. HIV-positive employees should read this first

You can live a long and healthy life with HIV. In the last few years, medicines have been developed that can effectively control the virus and maintain your body sufficiently strong to stay healthy. At the same time, the cost of AIDS drugs, and the cost of drugs to treat the infections that often come with AIDS, have fallen rapidly. Although there is still no cure for HIV/AIDS, it is manageable and treatable.

To maintain good health you need to understand that your immune system, which is your body's protection mechanism against disease, is unique. You can strengthen it but you can not completely change it. Regularly maintaining your physical and emotional health is the best way to help your body's immune system to fight off illness. To maintain good physical and emotional health you should consider the following suggestions:

- 1.) **Reflect and act.** Recalling when you may have been infected with the AIDS virus will help you seek the best treatment and plan for the future. On average, HIV-positive persons in Thailand will need regular medical advice after 8-10 years. Have your health checked regularly to prevent and treat illness and to determine when to start taking AIDS drugs. Talk to a counselor and consider joining a support group of people with HIV/AIDS.

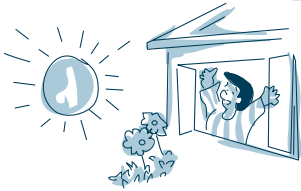


- 2.) **Positive motivation** is most important in maintaining a long and healthy life. Though support from friends and family is very important, the most important factor is your self-acceptance and motivation.

- 3.) **Educate yourself** by reading about HIV/AIDS, the body's immune system, the treatment of illnesses that may occur and how to maintain a healthy lifestyle. Seek information about AIDS drugs and their costs, and where to get psycho-social support. Find out about your rights



and latest developments in government assistance. Try to find a doctor whom you trust and with whom you can discuss your questions.



- 4.) **Continue working as normal.** This will help you maintain a positive, healthy lifestyle and not isolate yourself. You will not pose a threat to your colleagues, and if you maintain your health, you will be able to perform your duties as before. Nowadays, many people understand that they can live and work with HIV-positive colleagues.

- 5.) **Try to avoid stress** and get seven or eight hours' sleep a night to help your immune system to fight off illness.



- 6.) **Proper nutrition** is very important. You will need to eat more to maintain your body weight. Eat foods with lots of proteins (such as meats, fish, beans and nuts), rice and plenty of fruits. Avoid very spicy foods, as they may cause diarrhea. Exercise regularly to build and maintain muscle. Drink plenty of liquids to help your body deal with any medications you are taking. Practice food safety. Keep your kitchen clean, wash foods, avoid left-overs and be careful about food preparation and storage. Quit drinking alcohol and smoking if possible.



- 7.) **Always use condoms** when having sex, to protect your sexual partners and avoid the risk of being infected again.



- 8.) **Plan ahead for future costs.** Seek advice from your doctor or counselor on future expenses for medical treatment. Set aside money for times of illness that may occur.

- 9.) **Maintain normality.** Do not panic. Maintain your social activities. Make new friends by participating in support groups of HIV-positive people that exist throughout the country.



5 . Monitoring progress of HIV infection: CD4 count and viral load test

Two laboratory tests are critical to assessing the progression of HIV/AIDS and determining when to start treatment with AIDS-drugs: CD4 count and viral load test. Both tests are conducted through a blood sample drawn from a vein in your arm.

The CD4 count measures the number of CD4 cells in your blood and is used to assess the strength of your immune system, which is your body's protection mechanism against disease. CD4 cells are a type of white blood cell that help to identify, attack, and destroy specific bacteria, fungi, and other germs that affect the body. CD4 cells are a major target for HIV. The number of CD4 cells in the blood gradually

declines as HIV disease progresses, thus weakening your body's ability to fight off illnesses. If you have been diagnosed with HIV, ask your doctor to conduct a CD4 count in order to find out how strong your immune system is, how far HIV has advanced, and how much you may be at risk of infections due to a weakened immune system. The CD4 count should be repeated every three to four months in order to measure the progression of HIV. If your CD4 count declines over several months, your doctor may recommend beginning anti-retroviral therapy (taking AIDS-drugs). Your CD4 count should increase or stabilize as a result of effective therapy. Normal CD4 counts in adults range from 500 to 1,500 cells per microliter of blood. In general, doctors will prescribe AIDS-drugs when CD4 levels drop below the range from 200 to 350.

The CD4 count is used in combination with the viral load test, which measures the quantity of HIV in the blood. The viral load test should be repeated as regularly as the CD4 count in order to monitor the progression of the disease. It shows how actively the virus is reproducing in the body and indicates when anti-retroviral therapy should be started. A rising count of HIV indicates that an infection is getting worse, while a falling count indicates improvement and suppression of the HIV infection thanks to effective HIV-therapy.

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The Booklets of the series

Employers' Handbook on Managing HIV/AIDS in the Workplace

Include

Book I Preparing your Business for the Challenge of HIV/AIDS

Book II HIV/AIDS Prevention and Education in the Workplace

Book III HIV/AIDS Care and Support in the Workplace

Book IV Support and Care Referral Network



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