

Frequently Asked Questions on HIV Phobia

Q. Is WHO aware of reports of people who say they have a mysterious HIV-like disease?

Yes we have received reports, largely from the media, regarding people who are convinced they have HIV, despite having been tested for HIV, and having been found to be HIV negative. We are also aware that the Chinese health authorities have investigated the cases and conclusively ruled out the possibility of HIV infection.

Q. So if it is not HIV, is it an unknown, new virus?

New viruses are sometimes identified. However if these are illnesses caused by a new virus, then they have nothing to do with HIV or AIDS. To our knowledge, no new viruses have so far been identified in this group of patients.

Q: People fear that they may have contracted a kind of mutated HIV virus. Are there any reports from other countries about the "mutation" of HIV? Is HIV mutation possible?

The HIV virus is very adaptable. As with many other viruses, mutations of HIV are common and normal. However, the tests which are used to check whether someone has HIV are also able to detect these mutated versions of the virus.

Q. So what is this mystery disease?

We agree with the recent statement from the Ministry of Health, suggesting that the people whose cases were looked into may be suffering from what is commonly known as "HIV phobia".

Q. What is HIV phobia?

HIV phobia is a medical condition where the affected person feels they are unwell because they think that they may be infected with HIV. However, when tests are carried out to establish whether the person is HIV positive, they are found to be HIV negative. HIV phobia is essentially a psychological condition, stemming from a lack of understanding and fear of HIV.

Q. What are the symptoms of HIV phobia?

The most common symptoms are feeling physically and/or mentally unwell. This is a result of the person being convinced that he or she has HIV. Sometimes symptoms may be very severe and may affect the person's daily life and ability to relate to other people. Some people may have physical symptoms, illness, or disease caused by something else, but which they incorrectly attribute to HIV (or to a "mutated, undetectable" virus causing AIDS) because of phobia.

Q. How common is this situation in China and globally?

It is currently impossible to establish how prevalent this condition is in China or globally, since this is not a widely reported condition and many cases may go undiagnosed.

Two of the illnesses that cause the most fear amongst people worldwide are cancer and HIV. It is not unusual for people to think they may have one or the other of these. This concern may be heightened if they think they are at risk of either of these.

Q. Why are we seeing more cases now?

The perceived increase in HIV phobia in China could be due to several reasons. Firstly, there is increasing awareness of HIV but understanding remains at a superficial level. For example, people may know that HIV can be transmitted through unprotected sex, but may also believe that it can be transmitted by sharing food, shaking hands, or other forms of casual contact. Secondly, in the modern world, people use a wide variety of powerful communication platforms to interact, including the internet, mobile phones, etc. This allows people to make their voices heard and allows ideas and misunderstandings to spread quickly and visibly, giving the impression of an increase in cases.

Q. Some of the affected people say that they have asked WHO to ask international researchers to study their situation. How have you responded?

WHO is governed by sovereign UN Member States. We provide technical support only at the request of relevant governments or where there are events of concern to international public health.

In this case, the Chinese government has thoroughly investigated a large number of such cases and conclusively ruled out the possibility of HIV infection. WHO has full confidence in the results and conclusions of the Chinese government's investigations.

Q. What are the symptoms of HIV?

Classic symptoms of HIV infection include shingles, oral thrush, swollen lymph nodes in the neck, armpits and groin. Some people experience fatigue, rashes, a fever, a persistent cough, or frequent infections and flu-like symptoms. There are, however, other causes of all of these besides HIV. And in those who do have HIV, many have no symptoms, at least for a long time.

Symptoms vary between individuals, but it is common for infected persons to experience frequent health problems, as a result of their immune system having been weakened by the virus.

Q. If someone is showing symptoms of HIV, how can we find out for certain whether or not they are HIV positive?

An HIV test is the only sure way to tell whether someone is HIV positive. If the test result is negative, that means the person does not have the virus. One exception is during the window period when a person is first infected with HIV and when the virus manifests in his/her body, producing special antibodies against HIV. The duration of the window period may vary but it's generally between 1-3 months. During the window period, an HIV positive person may in fact test negative, despite being infected. For this reason, if a person suspects they may have been infected very recently, they should take a second HIV test after a period of 3 months

Q. Are you saying that these people are suffering from mental illness?

We are unable to say whether or not some of these people are suffering from mental illness because the results of psychological tests have not been shared with us. Also, some have very real symptoms or illness, but due to an entirely different reason. In that case they are inappropriately worried about HIV or AIDS, but this is not unusual when fear of AIDS is high.

HIV phobia can be a normal phenomenon. Many people in China and globally are afraid of being infected with HIV. When the HIV phobia is so severe that one is not able to go on with one's day to day life, this can be diagnosed as constituting a mental illness.

Mental illnesses are medical conditions that significantly disrupt a person's thinking, feeling, mood, ability to relate to others and daily functioning.

Q. What is the solution?

If the affected people are found not to be suffering from any mental illness, patients should be monitored until their symptoms disappear either on their own or with medication. Affected people should follow the advice of a medical professional regarding treatment of any unexplained symptoms such as fever, headaches, etc. If new unusual symptoms develop, then these should be further investigated. It is important to remember that apart from viruses, there are many other types of germs and infections that can cause similar symptoms. A thorough investigation will rule these out.

Q: Does the phenomenon of HIV phobia mean that HIV is spreading from high risk groups to the general population?

The phenomenon of HIV-Phobia means that we need to do more in educating the public about HIV, for example, what it is, how it is and is not transmitted, how it presents and how one can avoid infection. There are many myths surrounding HIV and many people in China have only a superficial knowledge of this infection. Correcting these myths can go a long way towards addressing HIV Phobia.