

General Studies – 2 Topic: Issues relating to development and management of Social Sector/Services relating to Health

HIV self-testing

1) Introduction

- HIV self-testing is defined as a process in which people can collect their own specimen (saliva or blood), perform a test and interpret the result, often in private or with someone they trust.
- Results are ready within 20 minutes or less.
- Those with positive results are advised to seek confirmatory tests at health clinics.
- WHO recommends they receive information and links to counselling as well as rapid referral to prevention, treatment and care services.

2) Need for HIV self-testing

- The United Nations has set targets to diagnose 90% of all people with HIV by 2020.
- countries are seeking ways to rapidly increase access to and uptake of HIV testing services
- HIV self-testing has showed potential to reach people at high risk for HIV who may not otherwise test
- Today more countries have begun to introduce or develop national HIV self-testing policies and regulatory frameworks
- Global coverage rates for all HIV testing, prevention, and treatment are lower among men than women.
- Twenty three countries currently have national policies that support HIV self-testing.

3) Present status in India

- There has been a 66 per cent drop in incidence in 2015 in India compared with 2000
- The number of new HIV infections last year was 86,000; children below 15 years of age alone account for 12 per cent of this number.
- The government has approved in principle the proposal to take HIV testing closer to those in need by starting community-based testing.
- India is also weighing the option of self-testing.

4) Benefits of HIV self-testing

- With the World Health Organisation releasing guidelines on HIV self-testing, a major obstacle in improving access to diagnosis has been cleared.
- Early diagnosis will help in a prompt start to treatment and enable the infected to live longer and healthier.
- HIV self-testing reach more people with undiagnosed HIV and represents a step forward to empower individuals, diagnose people earlier before they become sick
- This will bring services closer to where people live, and create demand for HIV testing
- This is particularly important for those people facing barriers to accessing existing services.
- People with HIV are suspected to face discrimination hence self testing ensures privacy & confidentiality,

5) OraQuick HIV self-testing

- The WHO-approved OraQuick HIV self-testing is based on HIV antibodies present in oral and blood samples.
- The test can detect antibodies developed within three months of getting infected.

- The OraQuick self-testing makes diagnosis easier and faster, besides ensuring privacy and confidentiality, thus encouraging more people to get tested.
- But there are challenges in terms of counselling and sensitivity, with the accuracy of the tests pegged at around 93 per cent.
- The risk of not getting tested far outweighs the limitations posed by self-testing.
- Twenty-three countries have in place policies that support HIV self-testing.

6) Concerns / Challenges

- Though much progress has been achieved in India in making HIV testing accessible and free of cost, many infected persons remain unaware of their status.
- Across the world, nearly 40 per cent of people with HIV are unaware of their infection and run the risk of unknowingly transmitting it.
- Despite greater awareness, people with HIV still face stigma and discrimination.
- There are challenges related to proper counselling of patients.
- Accuracy of tests is not 100% so it should also to be taken into consideration.
- Lack of awareness of the method among the illiterates.

7) Way Forward

- Counselling has to be done through innovative ways, such as over the telephone, as in the case of the U.S.
- People self-testing should be more aware about the possibility of false negatives.
- HIV self-testing should open the door for many more people to know their HIV status and find out how to get treatment and access prevention services.