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To see the citations for these articles, including electronic page number, [click here](#). For further explanation and help, [see here](#).

1. [Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Europe continuing](#)
2. [Further escalation of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic in 2005 but one million patients on antiretroviral therapy](#)
3. [Rubella outbreak in an unvaccinated religious community in the Netherlands leads to cases of congenital rubella syndrome](#)
4. [US study suggests universal vaccination of children with pneumococcal conjugate vaccine is beneficial for adults](#)
5. [Intravenous artesunate recommended for patients with severe malaria: position statement from TropNetEurop](#)

Transmission of HIV/AIDS in Europe continuing*

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The transmission of HIV/AIDS continues in Europe, according to the 2004 annual surveillance data released by the European Centre for the Epidemiological Monitoring of HIV/AIDS (EuroHIV; <http://www.eurohiv.org>) [1]. HIV/AIDS remains a major public health issue in Europe, with increasing numbers of people living with HIV [2]. The nature of the epidemic and its implications for public health policies varies in different countries [3,4]. Within the European Union, sexual transmission of HIV, both heterosexual and homosexual, continues to dominate.

Continued HIV transmission in the WHO European Region

In 2004, 71 755 new diagnoses of HIV were reported in countries in the World Health Organization (WHO) European Region (which includes all European Union (EU) countries). This number is similar to the number reported in 2003 (72 843). The number of newly diagnosed cases in 2004 is lower than the peak observed in 2001 (113 930 cases), but is nearly twice the number of reports in 1999 (39 602). Four countries reported rates of more than 200 new HIV diagnoses per million of the population in 2004: Estonia (568), Portugal (280), the Russian Federation (239) and Ukraine (212).

In 2004, 10 855 AIDS cases were reported in the WHO European Region, slightly lower than the number reported for 2003 (11 633). While AIDS incidence has been declining in Europe as a whole, it has increased continuously in eastern Europe and for the first time in 2004 has exceeded that of the west (27.4 versus 19.5 per million).

Trends in the European Union

In 23 of the 25 EU countries (national data not available for Italy or Spain), 21 164 newly diagnosed cases of HIV were reported in 2004 (a rate of 59 per million). Between 2001 and 2004, there was a 23% increase in the annual number of newly diagnosed HIV cases, up from 14 028 in 2001 to 17 281 in 2004 (data available for 20 countries: to compare 2001 data with 2004, some countries had to be excluded). The largest relative increases have been reported in western EU countries (43% in 11 countries and 69% in the United Kingdom) and 17% in central European countries. In contrast, there was a marked relative decrease in reports from the Baltic states in 2004 (-49%) following the high number of new diagnoses in 2001 in Estonia and Latvia associated with injecting drug use. Numbers of new diagnoses in the Baltic states remain relatively high, despite the decrease.

Risk groups in the European Union

In the European Union, the majority of newly diagnosed HIV cases in 2004 for which transmission route was reported (data missing for 23%) were infected through heterosexual contact (9059, 56%). Nearly a third of cases (4975, 31%) were in homo/bisexual men and 12% (1961) were in injecting drug users. Since 2001, there has been an increase in the number of cases with a reported heterosexual transmission group (48%), especially among individuals originating from countries with generalised epidemics, and amongst homosexual and bisexual men (35%). There has been a decrease among injecting drug users (31%).

The importance of appropriate and timely surveillance data to support and develop policies for the prevention and control of the HIV epidemic in Europe remains. In the European Union, the predominant mode of transmission is heterosexual, although many of the individuals infected this way may have acquired their infection outside Europe [5]. Prevention and care programmes must be adapted to reach these populations. Despite the continued promotion of safer sex amongst homosexual and bisexual men, the number of HIV reports has increased since 2001, and emphasises the need for innovative and better targeted health promotion campaigns also in this community.

This EuroHIV report is dedicated to the memory of Andrea Infuso, project leader of EuroTB and a dear and respected colleague and friend, who died suddenly on 20 September 2005 at the age of 44.

*Clarification

The author would like to clarify that the HIV data reported in the article is by year of report, not diagnosis.

Eurosurveillance editorial office, 9 December 2005

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[back to top](#)