Who needs an AIDS vaccine?

An AIDS vaccine is meant for people who are not infected with HIV but who are at risk of becoming infected. The primary purpose will be to block infection, so people who get the vaccine will not become HIV-infected in the future. But vaccination also has a public health benefit. If enough people in a community are vaccinated with an effective vaccine, there are statistically fewer chances for an infectious disease to be transmitted, thus lowering the risk of infection for people who have not been vaccinated or individuals for whom the vaccine is not effective. Society as a whole will benefit because fewer people will be infected during their productive years of life, more people will live longer and there will be fewer AIDS orphans.

The current sponsors of AIDS vaccine trials are already working on access for people who will need the vaccine most once it is available. New strategies are being developed to improve health infrastructures and distribution channels and to ensure eventual vaccines are affordable, especially for resource-poor countries. This can only happen through partnerships and agreements among many players, including governments, donors, international organizations and the private sector.

Clear and accurate information about AIDS vaccines will also be critical once they become available. AIDS vaccines, especially first generation products, will most likely be 'partially effective', meaning that they will not fully protect everyone who receives them. It will be very important for people to understand the limitations of partially effective vaccines so that they do not return to behaviour that puts them at risk of becoming infected. Existing prevention methods, such as condoms, partner reduction, abstinence, and clean needles must be promoted even for people who would receive such a vaccine.

However, even a partially effective AIDS vaccine will have a significant impact on the epidemic if given to a large segment of the population, especially in countries with high HIV rates. IAVI estimates that a 50% effective vaccine given to just 30% of the population could cut the number of new HIV infections in the developing world by more than half in 15 years. A highly effective vaccine coupled with broad coverage could come close to stopping AIDS. It is likely that a vaccine that reduces the number of infections by 20% to 80% would produce significant health and economic benefits and likely be quite cost-effective.

'Only a truly effective, preventive HIV vaccine can limit and eventually eliminate the threat of AIDS.'
Former President Bill Clinton, Speech at Morgan State University – Baltimore, Maryland, US., 18 May 1997. This speech launched World AIDS Vaccine Day on 18 May.

'Even a modestly effective vaccine could cut the number of new infections by one-third over a decade, saving tens of millions of lives.'

Stephen Lewis, United Nations' special envoy for AIDS in Africa at the International AIDS Conference – Toronto, 16 August 2006