

From Stigma to Solutions

The Rise of HIV Self-Testing in Mizoram

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Nestled in the northeastern hills of India, **Mizoram** is known for its scenic landscapes and close-knit communities. Mizoram is also becoming an **inspiration** for its **fight against HIV/AIDS**. Mizoram has been dabbling with the problem of being the state with the highest HIV prevalence in India, with a significant portion of the affected population being young adults. The **traditional methods** of HIV testing—often requiring individuals to visit healthcare centers—have proven to be **inadequate** due to stigma and logistical challenges. Against this backdrop, the introduction of **HIV self-testing (HIVST)** has emerged as a **revolutionary approach**, offering a more private, convenient, and effective means of diagnosis.



Mizoram has consistently recorded **alarming rates** of HIV infections, far surpassing the national average. The primary modes of transmission have been identified as unprotected sex and intravenous drug use. Despite awareness campaigns, many individuals remain hesitant to get tested, leading to delayed diagnoses and an increased risk of transmission. Hence, a new approach was necessary—one that could empower individuals to take control of their health without fear of stigma or logistical challenges. **This is where HIV self-testing has proven to be a game-changer.**

HIV self-testing allows individuals to test themselves in the **privacy** of their homes using **easy-to-use kits**. These kits typically involve collecting a saliva or blood sample and obtaining results within minutes. This approach has been **successfully implemented in several countries**, and its introduction in Mizoram has sparked hope in the fight against HIV. The benefits of HIV self-testing include **tackling stigma** and **empowering** people to take **proactive steps** in managing their health by visiting a healthcare professional once they detect a positive result. Additionally, HIVST bridges the logistical gap by **bringing testing to people's homes**, ensuring that even those in the most **remote locations** can test themselves without traveling long distances.

The success of HIV self-testing in Mizoram offers a **valuable blueprint** for other states facing similar challenges. If scaled up properly, HIVST can **transform HIV prevention strategies** across India, particularly in regions with high infection rates and limited healthcare access. **Tailored public awareness campaigns** focusing on localized issues and breaking down stigma through targeted messaging can be effective. Leveraging **digital health solutions** by integrating HIVST with mobile apps and **telehealth services** for counseling and follow-up support can improve accessibility. **Public-private partnerships** can play a crucial role in expanding reach and availability by collaborating with private healthcare providers and NGOs.

The Government of India has been actively working to combat the HIV/AIDS epidemic through various

initiatives. One of the most significant efforts is the **National AIDS and STD Control Programme (NACP) Phase-V**, a Central Sector Scheme fully funded by the government with an outlay of **Rs 15,471.94 crore**. The programme extends the national AIDS and STD response till the **Financial Year 2025-26** and aligns with the **United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3.3**, which aims to end the HIV/AIDS epidemic as a public health threat by **2030**.

Building upon past initiatives like the **HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Act (2017)**, **Test and Treat Policy**, **Universal Viral Load Testing**, **Mission Sampark**, and **Community-Based Screening**, NACP Phase-V introduces newer strategies to consolidate and augment progress. A key component of this phase is the **Sampoorna Suraksha Kendras (SSK)**, which operate as **single-window service centers** for individuals at risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs). These centers provide a holistic set of services tailored to clients' needs, ensuring strong linkages and referrals within and outside the healthcare system. Through a comprehensive **prevention-test-treat-care continuum**, the government is ensuring that HIV detection and treatment reach every corner of the country, including remote states like Mizoram.



Further, in Mizoram, the **Mizoram State AIDS Control Society (MSACS)** has several schemes for HIV/AIDS prevention and testing, including mobile testing centers, counseling, and treatment. The efforts of MSACS and the Mizoram state government in combating HIV infection among people, **especially in prisons**, have been acknowledged by the **United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime**.

HIV self-testing is proving to be a **revolutionary tool** in Mizoram's fight against HIV/AIDS. By addressing the twin challenges of stigma and accessibility, HIVST empowers individuals to take charge of their health, promotes early diagnosis, and ultimately reduces transmission rates. As Mizoram continues to lead the way in implementing self-testing, its success story serves as an inspiration for other states and regions looking to adopt innovative, community-driven approaches to public health. With the right policies, support, and awareness, **HIV self-testing could well become a national strategy in the fight against HIV/AIDS, turning the tide in one of India's most pressing health crises.**

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