

WHERE AND WHEN DID AIDS ORIGINATE?

In 1981, the first cases of the acquired immunodeficiency virus (AIDS) occurred in the USA and have since become a major worldwide epidemic.

AIDS is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), which progressively destroys the body's ability to fight infections and certain cancers.

What type of virus is HIV?

HIV is part of a family or group of viruses called lentiviruses. Lentiviruses other than HIV have been found in a wide range of nonhuman primates and are known as simian (monkey) viruses (SIV).

So where did HIV come from?

It is now generally accepted that HIV is a descendant of simian immunodeficiency virus (SIV). Certain SIVs closely resemble HIV-1 and HIV-2.

In February 1999 it was announced that a group of researchers from the University of Alabama had studied frozen tissue from a chimpanzee and found that the SIV it carried was almost identical to HIV-1. It is claimed by the researchers that this shows that these chimpanzees were the source of HIV-1, and that the virus at some point crossed species from chimpanzees to humans.

How could HIV have crossed species?

It has been known for a long time that certain viruses can pass from animals to humans. It is

widely believed that HIV gained access to the human host through blood contact during monkey hunting, cleaning and eating.

Is there any evidence of when the transfer took place?

Three of the earliest known instances of HIV infection are as follows:

- A plasma sample taken in 1959 from an adult male living in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo
- HIV found in tissue samples from an African-American teenager who died in St. Louis in 1969
- HIV found in tissue samples from a Norwegian sailor who died around 1976

We will probably never know exactly when and where the virus first emerged, but what is clear is that sometime in the middle of the 20th century, HIV infection in humans developed into the epidemic of disease around the world that we now refer to as AIDS.

What caused the epidemic to spread so suddenly?

There are a number of factors that may have contributed to the sudden spread including:

- International travel
- The blood industry
- Widespread drug use
- Unsafe sexual practices



Nebraska AIDS Education and Training Center

A collaboration of University of Nebraska Medical Center and Nebraska AIDS Project

For more information on transmission, you may call the Nebraska AIDS Hotline at 1-800-782-AIDS or Nebraska AIDS Project at 402-552-9260. HIV/AIDS Basic Trainings or in-services on specific topics are available through the Nebraska AIDS Education and Training Center.