Haiti launches new AIDS testing, information campaign

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Haiti's Ministry of Health and the United Nations launched a new anti-HIV/AIDS campaign Friday, providing information and rapid testing to help thwart the spread of the epidemic.

"If a person does not protect him or herself, it's because of a lack of information," Valerie Toureau, a doctor with the UNAIDS organization said.

More than 100 people got tested at a center installed in downtown Port-au-Prince, and condoms were also distributed.

"As for testing and treatment, support for this is free, something that people need to know," Toureau said.

The initiative coincides with an annual day of HIV testing across the Caribbean.

Some 150,000 Haitians are HIV-positive, a number that represents 55 percent of all HIV cases across the Caribbean.

"In the most remote, rural areas of the country, we see that the population is not sufficiently informed about the disease and there are also a lot of myths surrounding HIV in Haiti," Toureau said.

Some prostitutes, for example, refuse to use protection if having sex in the ocean, under the false belief that salt water kills germs and disease.

HIV has a 2.2 percent prevalence across Haiti, a figure that increases to 8.4 percent among sex workers and 18.5 percent among gay men.

Homosexuality, while not considered a criminal act in Haiti, remains taboo, presenting a major barrier to screening.

"Stigma and discrimination exists and there is a lot of work to do," Toureau said.

Despite recent advances, 7,500 HIV-positive people die each year in Haiti.

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