

# Chile's new sexual freedom leads to AIDS spike

May 31 2018, by Paulina Abramovich

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Carolina del Real, 37, was diagnosed as HIV positive seven years ago, and now devotes her time to teaching people about prevention

The winds of change are blowing through Chile where a youthful sexual revolution is shattering taboos—but also sparking an explosion of HIV

cases that has set off alarm bells in the traditionally conservative Latin American country.

Chile has the highest rate of HIV cases in the region—some 5,816 new cases were registered last year, a jump of 96 percent since 2010.

Young people aged 15 to 29 are the most exposed, say authorities, who are poised to unveil a new prevention plan for HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

"There has been a change in sexual behavior among young Chileans, linked to new ways of experimenting with their sexuality," said Claudia Dides of the Miles Corporation, a non-governmental organization that advocates for sexual and reproductive rights.

"It is no longer about feelings or passion, it's just about hooking up," said Dr Carlos Beltran, an expert in infectious diseases and member of the commission putting together the new plan.

"Now, young people have sexual encounters," he says, with many of them blurring the lines between gay and heterosexual relations.

## **'Public policy 30 years behind'**

This evolution in sexual mores among young people has troubled much of the rest of the largely conservative Chilean society, particularly politicians.

"There is a complete discrepancy between official discourse, and today's reality: neither the government nor lawmakers want to see this, and [public policy](#) is 30 years behind" on this, said Dides.



After suffering a bout of pneumonia that left her close to death, Carolina del

Real decided to share her experiences

Sex education disappeared from Chilean high schools about 10 years ago, largely due to opposition by conservative groups.

Among young Chileans aged 15 to 29, 71 percent say they are sexually active, but only 30 percent have ever been tested for HIV.

Just 20 percent know what constitutes risky [sexual behavior](#), according to figures from the National Youth Institute.

And the use of condoms among people aged 15-24 plunged from 30 to 22 percent between 2016 and 2017, according to figures from the health ministry.

That is largely, experts say, because of a perception that there is little risk.

"The way HIV is seen in society is very different from a few years ago," said Carlos Passarelli, the representative in Chile for the United Nations Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS).

"Young Chileans no longer fear AIDS," agreed Beltran. "In fact, they are ready to expose themselves voluntarily to the virus by having sexual relations with infected people."

## **Living with HIV**

Carolina del Real, 37, discovered she was HIV-positive seven years ago, and now devotes her time to teaching people about prevention.



Del Real continues to struggle against prejudices in Chile over AIDS

She herself was only diagnosed after a bout of pneumonia left her close to death.

"Nobody thought that I ought to have a test. And me neither. I did not even know what it was called," she told AFP.

So she decided to share her experience.

"When I came out of the clinic I started telling what had happened to me to my friends, to friends of friends. I needed to tell them: Please take the test. This could happen to you."

"From day to day everything is normal... But I feel vulnerable," said del Real, who every evening takes antiretroviral drugs supplied by Chile's health authorities.

And while [young people](#) may no longer fear HIV/AIDS as they once did—prejudice towards carriers of the virus remains entrenched in Chilean society at large.

For del Real, it means she can no longer find a stable job, get credit or take out insurance.

"What happens if I die old and alone? If at 37 a fever leaves me immobilized, how is my old age going to be?" she asked.

"I never imagined that HIV would represent for me the possibility of finding more sense in my life, to make the world a little better that I found it. I transformed my illness into an opportunity but... obviously I would have preferred not to have caught HIV."

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