

WHAT IS HIV?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus, commonly known as HIV, is spread when infected bodily fluids from one person enter another person's body. Pre-cum, semen, vaginal fluids, blood, and breast milk are the fluids that can transmit the virus. Unprotected sex is the most common way people get infected with HIV in the U.S., followed by sharing needles.

HIV attacks the very cells which normally defend the body against illness. Eventually, HIV weakens the immune system to such an extent that the body can no longer fight off other diseases and infections.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS, or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, is the most advanced stage of HIV. There are two ways that doctors decide when a person infected with HIV is considered to have advanced to an AIDS diagnosis:

1. **From other infections:** When a person's immune system is so weakened by HIV that one or more specific illnesses, called opportunistic infections, takes hold. These illnesses do not generally affect a person with a healthy immune system.
2. **From certain blood tests:** When the number of healthy immune system cells in an HIV positive person's body drops to a certain low point, or when the amount of HIV in their blood reaches a certain high point (also called the "viral load").

The key to slowing the progression of HIV to AIDS is early testing, care, and treatment.

IS THERE A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIV AND AIDS?

HIV and AIDS are part of a continuum. HIV is the virus that infects the body and AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV. So, not everyone who has HIV has AIDS, but, everyone who has AIDS is infected with HIV.

How quickly someone with HIV advances to AIDS depends on many different factors. One important factor is how soon after HIV infection a person is diagnosed and gets into care. Also, just like any other health problem, different people's bodies respond differently to HIV. So, it is important to get tested, get care if you are positive and protect yourself and your partner(s).

HOW DOES SOMEONE GET HIV?

HIV is primarily spread through unprotected sexual contact— that is, vaginal, anal, or oral sex. The chances of getting or passing HIV from oral sex are lower than vaginal or anal sex, but there is still a risk. HIV can also be spread by sharing needles.

Women who are HIV positive can pass HIV to their baby before or during delivery or through breastfeeding after birth. Medications are available, however, that greatly reduce the chance of an HIV positive mother passing HIV to her baby.

Certain bodily fluids that can be shared between people during unprotected sex, such as semen, pre-cum, vaginal fluids, or blood, can contain the virus, as can blood that is shared by sharing needles.

Saliva, tears or sweat have never been shown to cause an HIV infection. Kissing is also safe (open mouth kissing is considered very low risk.) HIV is not spread through casual contact like holding hands or hugging, or by sharing drinks or sitting on toilet seats

WHO IS AT RISK FOR HIV?

Often, people don't think of themselves or their partners as being at risk, so they don't worry about using protection or getting tested. But anyone who has had unprotected sex, or who has injected drugs, or has had a partner who has done either of these things, or whose partner's other partners may have done these things, may be at risk.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one in four people who are HIV positive don't know it. The CDC recommends HIV testing for everyone between the ages of 13 and 64. This does not mean though that testing is done automatically when you see a health care provider even if you have blood drawn. The only way to know for sure you are being tested is to ask to be tested.

HOW DO I REDUCE MY RISK OF GETTING HIV?

Use condoms each and every time you have sex. When used consistently and correctly condoms are considered highly effective in preventing the spread of HIV and also protecting against many other STDs. If you do use needles don't share them.

It is also important to know your own – and your partner's – HIV status. By knowing if you have HIV, or another STD, you can take precautions to protect your own health and your partners. Get tested regularly, especially before starting a new relationship.

IS THERE A VACCINE OR CURE FOR HIV?

There is no vaccine to prevent HIV or cure for those who are already infected. But there are medications available that have helped many people with HIV to live long and healthy lives. For someone who is HIV positive, it is important to know as soon as possible so you can work with your doctor to determine the best treatment for you.

WHAT IS THE LINK BETWEEN HIV AND OTHER SEXUALLY TRANSMITTED DISEASES (STDs)?

People with other STDs (such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes or syphilis) are at greater risk of getting HIV if they have unprotected sex with someone who is HIV positive. In addition, if someone with HIV is also infected with another STD, he or she is more likely to transmit the virus through sexual contact.

The only way to know if you have an STD, including HIV, is to get tested. Many STDs are curable, and all are treatable. Getting treated for an STD can help prevent more serious health effects and reduce your risk of contracting HIV if you are exposed.