HIV & AIDS: What You Need to Know

What is AIDS

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) attacks the immune system, the body's defense against disease. People who have HIV are said to be HIV antibody positive. Because HIV can live in the body for many years and have no effect, many people who are HIV-positive appear and feel healthy.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is the advanced stage when the immune system of people with HIV infection is seriously impaired, and cannot fight off illness or infection. Kaposi Sarcoma (a cancer of the blood vessels), PCP (a type of pneumonia) and CMV retinitis (a viral infection that affects the eyes) are common AIDS-related illnesses.

You can be HIV-positive and not know it. Your sexual partner can be HIV-positive and not know it. Anyone who is HIV-positive can pass on the virus to someone else.

Who can get AIDS?

Anyone can become infected with HIV. With AIDS, it doesn’t matter who you are, it matters what you do.

How is HIV spread?

Large amounts of HIV can be found in the blood, semen and vaginal fluids of infected people. HIV is spread by:

Unprotected sexual intercourse

- Any person infected with HIV can pass the virus to another person through sexual activity where semen, vaginal fluids or blood enter the other person’s body and into the bloodstream.
- Unprotected sex means having sexual intercourse without the proper use of a latex condom or latex barrier. Unprotected sexual intercourse puts both persons at risk.
- Anal and vaginal sexual intercourse are the highest risk activities.
- Oral sex can also pose some risk.

Infected blood

- Sharing needles, syringes or other equipment for injecting drugs, including steroids, can pass infected blood from one person to another. This is an extremely dangerous activity.
- Equipment used for tattoos, ear piercing and acupuncture can pass on the virus if the equipment is not sterilized properly after each use.
- The risk of becoming infected by receiving transfusions with blood or blood products in Canada is extremely low. Since November 1985, all donated blood is tested for the HIV antibody, thereby greatly reducing the risk of HIV infection by blood transfusion.

Mother to child

- Women who are infected with HIV can pass it on to their babies during pregnancy, childbirth or through breast-feeding.

How can I know if someone is infected with HIV?
You can’t. Many people who are HIV-positive look and feel healthy. They themselves might not even know that they are infected. But they can still pass the virus on to others.

Can I get AIDS from everyday contact?

No. The virus in not spread by ordinary, everyday contact with people such as:

- hugging;
- shaking hands;
- eating meals with or prepared by people infected with HIV.

You cannot get the virus from:

- telephones;
- toilet seats;
- swimming pools or hot tubs; or
- water fountains or sharing glasses or dishes.

Can I get AIDS from donating blood?

No. You cannot be infected with HIV by donating blood. All needles used to take donations are used only once. If you have HIV or AIDS, do not donate blood, organs, tissues or sperm.

How should I react to people who are HIV-positive or who have AIDS?

With compassion. Be reassured that everyday contact with someone who is HIV-positive does not pose a risk to you. Remember that people who are HIV-positive or have AIDS are going through pain and fear like anyone who has a life-threatening illness. They will appreciate your kindness, care and support.

Can I get AIDS from kissing?

Very small traces of HIV have been found in the saliva of infected people. However, of the hundreds of thousands of cases of AIDS reported world-wide, none have been reported as being caused by saliva alone. However, deep kissing where there are open sores or cuts in the mouth increases the risk. It is the blood-to-blood contact, not the saliva, that can transmit the HIV.

I will be traveling outside of Canada. Should I be concerned?

You should be aware that not all blood supplies outside of Canada are safe.

Can I get AIDS from mosquitoes?

No. HIV is not spread by insects. The virus cannot reproduce inside an insect, so even those insects that draw blood cannot pass on the infection.

How can I protect myself from HIV infection?

Abstain from sexual intercourse.

It’s okay to say “no” to sex. Respect yourself. You are important and you are responsible for you and your sexual behavior. Don’t be afraid to say “no” to a sexual relationship, even if you’ve had sex.
before. If you are not ready for it, if you think it might be unsafe or if it just doesn’t feel right, don’t do it. You have the right to ask your partner about his or her sexual past.

**Choose one partner for life.**

The greatest risk of HIV infection is from having sexual intercourse with an infected partner. If you and your uninfected partner have sexual intercourse with each other only and neither of you has ever been previously exposed to the virus, then you are not at risk. If you or your partner are infected with HIV, remember always to practice safer sex.

If you increase the number of your sexual partners, and are not practicing safer sex, then you directly increase your risk of HIV infection or getting other sexually transmitted disease such as gonorrhea, syphilis or hepatitis B. Remember that sexual partners can pass on disease they may have picked up from previous sexual encounters. You are, in effect, coming in contact with every partner your partner ever had.

Before becoming sexually involved, both you and your partner should each consider having HIV antibody test.

**Always practice safer sex.**

Safer sex means consistent and proper use of a latex condom or barrier (e.g. dental dam or plastic wrap).

- Use only latex condoms. When properly used, latex condoms provide safer, though not 100 per cent safe, sex.
- If you use lubricants, be certain to use only water-based lubricants.
- Check the expiry date. Condoms weaken over time and should not be used beyond the expiry date (00 represents the year 2000).
- Don’t store condoms where they can be damaged by heat, cold or sharp objects. Condoms should not be carried in back pockets.
- Men who aren’t accustomed to condoms should practice with them alone before using them during intercourse.

An intact latex condom (a “rubber” or “safe”) when used properly, will stop semen, vaginal fluids or blood from passing between sexual partners.

If you are going to have sex with anyone, it is your right to insist on the use of a latex condom to protect yourself and your partner from HIV infection and other sexually transmitted disease. A spermicide such as Nonoxynol-9 can provide extra protection when used together with a condom. Nonoxynol-9 can cause irritation in some people and should not be used if it does.

Both women and men should make sure that condoms are available when needed and that they are properly applied and consistently used. In taking equal responsibility, people are able to look after their own health, their future children’s health as well as their sexual partner’s health.

If your partner refuses to use latex condoms and you are unsure if both of you are free from HIV, then both of you are at risk. Be prepared to say “no” to a dangerous situation.

If you feel embarrassed about telling your partner that you want to use a condom, show them how. Leave some condoms out where they will be seen. Chances are your partner will be glad that you did.

Birth control pills do not provide protection against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Condoms must also be used with birth control pills to provide protection against sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.
**Never share needles or syringes.**

Never share needles, syringes, or "works." Otherwise you could be injecting HIV directly into your bloodstream. Never share cleaning/rinsing solutions that someone else has used. For more information on safer needle use, contact an AIDS service organization or needle exchange program.

**How can I find out if I have come in contact with HIV?**

You can have a special blood test. You have to ask your doctor for this test as it is not automatically performed. You can also have the test at the STD clinic nearest you.

If the virus is present in the body, the virus will leave "footprints" or "markers." These footprints are called HIV antibodies.

The only way to know for certain if antibodies are present in the body is to have a special blood test, the HIV antibody test.

A positive test result means that antibodies have been found in your blood This means that you are infected with HIV and are therefore referred to as being HIV-positive. It does not necessarily mean that you have AIDS, nor does it indicate if or when you might develop AIDS. Medical follow-up is important if you are HIV-positive.

If you have any concerns that you may have been exposed to HIV, then you can have the HIV antibody test done 12 weeks after your last potential high-risk exposure.

**Should I be tested?**

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you may want to be tested or may want to seek more information:

- Have you ever had unprotected sexual intercourse with someone infected with HIV or AIDS?
- Have you had anal or vaginal intercourse with a number of sexual partners and not consistently used latex condoms?
- Have you had a sexually transmitted disease since 1978?
- Have you or your sexual partner(s) shared needles to take drugs or other substances?
- Have you had a blood transfusion between 1978 and 1986?
- Have you had an organ or tissue transplant or in-vitro fertilization since 1978?

If you think you might have been infected with HIV and are planning to have children, it is important to seek counseling about the risks and reducing the risks. If you are infected, there is a risk of passing the virus to your partner or to your baby. There are early interventions that can reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to your baby.

If you are entering a new relationship and want to ensure that you are both HIV-free, you may wish to seek information, counseling and testing through one of the testing facilities.

The pros and cons of taking the HIV antibody test, what the results mean, and what the consequences could be for you should all be considered before taking the test. You should discuss this with your doctor, STD clinic or anonymous test clinic nurse. The earlier you know about HIV infection, the more you can do to stay healthy longer. Together with a doctor who knows about AIDS, you can keep track of your health.

Community AIDS service organizations, STD clinics and anonymous HIV test clinic provide free advice and counseling about the test.
Where can I be tested?

Free testing is available through your doctor, through a sexually transmitted disease (STD) clinic or an anonymous HIV test clinic.

Can I be assured of confidentiality?

It is the responsibility of anyone seeking counseling and testing to discuss the issue of confidentiality with the doctor or clinic nurse.

Is there a vaccine for HIV?

No. Because there is not yet a vaccine, everybody is responsible for protecting not only themselves but also their sexual partners from the risk of HIV.

What treatments are available for people who are HIV-positive?

There are drugs, therapies and treatments that slow the progress of HIV and lengthen and improve the lives of people with HIV.

There is no known cure for HIV infection. No drug has yet been found that will destroy HIV or eliminate it from the body.

Resources

If you need further information on HIV and AIDS, contact your physician or local public health office. You may also want to check out some of the resources that follow.

Directory of Sexually Transmitted Disease Clinics

Directory of Anonymous HIV Testing Clinics
Introduction to AIDS (What is AIDS?)

I History
A. AIDS was first recognized as a disease in the United States in 1981 and first isolated in 1985. It originally appeared in the United States on the east and west coasts (New York City and San Francisco). Most likely traceable to Africa. In 1987, 40,845 cases had been reported in the United States. It has been reported that by the year 1994, there were 415,000 – 535,000 diagnosed cases of which 320,000 – 385,000 had already died.

The only known prevention for AIDS is education of the disease itself; it is not a cure but a hope in slowing down the disease.

II Definition of AIDS – Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
A. Acquired – AIDS is not an inherited disease, but rather it is passed from person to person.
I Immune – refers to the body’s natural mechanism to protect itself from disease.
D Deficiency – means that the immune system is not working.
S Syndrome – indicates that a pattern of symptoms has developed.

III Causes and Progression
A. The AIDS virus attacks the T-helper cells in our immune system. When activated, the AIDS virus (also known as HIV for Human Immunodeficiency Virus) attacks other T-helper cells which in turn become sites for new HIV production. The outcome is the destruction of the body’s immune system.

It may stay dormant in the T-helper cells from three weeks to the life of the individual. Most commonly, the virus produces symptoms in from one to seven years after infection with the virus.

The AIDS virus doesn’t kill itself, but allows other microorganisms which would not ordinarily cause severe diseases in an individual to become life threatening. These diseases are referred to as Opportunistic Diseases and may include: (1) a form of pneumonia; (2) Kaposi’s Sarcoma – a form of cancer or tumor of the blood and/or lymphatic vessel walls. It appears as blue-violet to brownish skin blotches of bumps. It was a very rare disease in the general population. At the present, of those AIDS patients suffering from Kaposi’s Sarcoma, all have used amyl nitrate (poppers).
B. No signs of infection. Some people remain apparently well after infection with the HIV. They may have no physically apparent symptoms of illness. These infected individuals can spread the virus to others through sexual intercourse or sharing needles. Anyone who thinks he or she is infected, or involved in high risk behaviors, should not donate his or her blood, organs, tissues, or sperm because they may now contain the HIV.

C. ARC – Aids Related Complex is a condition caused by the HIV in which the patient tests positive for HIV infection and has specific set of clinical symptoms. However, ARC patients’ symptoms are often less severe than those with the disease called classic or full blown AIDS. Signs and symptoms of ARC may include loss of appetite, weight loss, fever, night sweats, diarrhea, tiredness, lack of resistance to infection, or swollen lymph nodes. These are also signs and symptoms of many other diseases and physicians should be consulted.

D. Full Blown or Classic AIDS – only a qualified health professional can diagnose AIDS, which is the result of a natural progress of infection by the HIV. AIDS destroys the body's immune system and allows otherwise controllable infections to invade the body and cause additional disease. These opportunistic diseases would not otherwise gain a foothold in the body. These opportunistic diseases may eventually cause death. A woman who is infected with the HIV and becomes pregnant, is more likely to develop ARC or Classic AIDS.

Some symptoms and signs of AIDS and the “opportunistic infections” may include a persistent cough and fever with shortness of breath or difficult breathing. These may be the symptoms of pneumocystis carinii pneumonia. Multiple purplish blotches and bumps on the skin may be a sign of Kaposi’s Sarcoma. HIV in all infected people is essentially the same; the reactions of individuals may differ.

E. Long Term – The HIV may also attack the nervous system and cause delayed damage to the brain. This damage may take years to develop and the symptoms may show up as memory loss, indifference, loss of coordination, partial paralysis, or mental disorder. These symptoms may occur alone, or with other symptoms mentioned previously.

Presently, 60% of all AIDS patients show some degree of neurological dysfunction.
How AIDS Is and Is Not Transmitted

IV. Transmission of AIDS

People do not become infected with the HIV in day-to-day, casual contact with family, friends, acquaintance, or the population at large, unless that contact involves sexual encounters or sharing of needles or syringes from intravenous drug use contaminated by an infected person.

The virus that causes AIDS lives in certain body fluids, especially blood and semen. People most commonly become infected with HIV after their blood system has come into direct contact with the semen, blood, or vaginal secretions of someone else who is infectious. Although the HIV has been isolated from other body fluids such as saliva, tears, or perspiration, transmission has never been proven to have occurred in contact with these.

HIV has been isolated in the following in AIDS patients:

A. 70% of the samples of blood and semen (very high concentrations)
B. 1% of the samples of saliva, tears, and vaginal fluids (low concentrations)
C. 1 case of transmission to a new born through breast milk

1. Sexual Contact – regardless of the sexes involved. Account for 77% of all cases reported.
2. Shared needles or syringes for intravenous drug use (and possibly the use of nonprofessional tattoo needles). It is requested that all blood rituals such as that used in becoming blood brothers be eliminated. Accounts for 17% of all cases reported.
3. Contact with contaminated blood products. This includes receiving transfusions although all blood since 1985 has been screened. Account for 2% of all cases reported.
4. Children infected from birth born to a mother with HIV. 80% of AIDS children under five years old have mothers who are IV drug users or have sex partners who are bisexual or are IV drug users.

V. High Risk Groups

AIDS does not discriminate by race, sex, or age. Although the initial discovery was in the homosexual community, AIDS is not a disease only of homosexuals/ AIDS is found in heterosexual people as well. AIDS is not just a male disease. AIDS is found in women; it is found in children.

AIDS is found in all races. In the future, AIDS will probably increase and spread among people who are not homosexual or intravenous drug users in the same manner as other sexually transmitted diseases.
VI. Prevention of AIDS

AIDS prevention education shall specifically teach students that engaging in homosexual activity, promiscuous sexual activity, intravenous drug use or contact with contaminated blood products is now known to be primarily responsible for contact with the AIDS virus. [Title O.S. 1987 Supp 11-103.3]

A. Abstinence – Practice abstinence. Since HIV can be transmitted by either heterosexual activity, the avoidance of sexual activity is the most effective manner of not contracting or spreading HIV. Abstinence from sexual activity is the only certain means for the prevention of the spread or contraction of the HIV through sexual contact. Learn to say “NO!”

B. Artificial Means of Birth Control – Know that artificial means of birth control such as condoms and spermicide are not a certain means of preventing the spread of the HIV, and reliance on such methods puts a person at risk for exposure to the disease. Sexual activity with or without condoms, with any person testing positive for HIV antibodies, or any other person infected with HIV, places that individual in a high risk category for developing AIDS.

C. Don’t share needles and/or syringes – Sharing needles and/or syringes to inject heroin, cocaine, and any other drug is directly related to the risk of getting AIDS.

   All drugs and alcohol reduce the ability of the body to resist infection. More importantly, drugs and alcohol may alter the user’s judgment, making the person more likely to participate in sex activities.

D. Promote Blood Supply Safety – Persons in high risk groups should not donate blood. Because of sophisticated screening and processing, the chances are about one in one million of getting AIDS from a blood transfusion. A person cannot contract AIDS while donating blood because new and sterile equipment is used.

E. Tests for AIDS – There is no test for AIDS. The tests being done for AIDS (both ELISA and Western Blot) are for the antibodies to the AIDS virus. The antibody is created as part of the body’s defense system against infection. Presence of the HIV antibodies means that a person exposed to HIV, not that they have AIDS. Testing is available through private physicians and/or the Oklahoma State Department of Health (test sites are available in five locations in Oklahoma). Those testing positive to the HIV are presently 65% asymptomatic, 24% ARC, and 15% classic AIDS.
VII. Misconceptions about AIDS

There are no known medically documented cases of AIDS contracted or spread by:

1. Donating Blood
2. Sharing food or drinks
3. Touching or hugging someone
4. Insect bite
5. Riding in public transportation (buses, trains, cabs, planes, etc)
6. Toilet seats
7. Sinks
8. Swimming pools
9. Hot tubs
10. Drinking fountains
11. Sharing telephones
12. Sharing pencils or pens
13. Being coughed or sneezed on
14. Shaking hands
15. Sharing tools
16. Social kissing
17. Crying
18. Sharing bed linen, towels, cups, straws, dishes, and/or other eating utensils.
19. Door knobs
20. Office machinery
21. Household furniture