



BASIC FACTS ABOUT HIV/AIDS

What is HIV?

HIV infection is a viral infection caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). It is the virus that causes AIDS.

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is a disease in which the body's immune system breaks down, and leads to infections that are hard for the body to fight.

When a person is infected with HIV, the virus enters the body and lives mostly in the white blood cells. These cells usually help protect us from disease. As the virus grows, it damages or kills what are called T helper cells. This makes it easier for the person to develop other illnesses ranging from pneumonia to cancer.

A person has AIDS if he or she has tested positive for HIV and has one or both of these conditions:

One or more AIDS-related infections or illnesses

T-cell counts that are 200 or lower.

(In healthy people, the count ranges from 450 to 1200.)

How quickly do HIV infected people develop AIDS?

In some people, the AIDS infections develop soon after infection with HIV. But most people do not develop symptoms for 10 – 12 years. Early medical care can help people live longer and healthier.

How many people are affected by HIV/AIDS?

There are now approximately 40 million people in the world living with HIV or AIDS. Most of them do not know they carry HIV and may be spreading the virus to others. In the U.S., about one million people have HIV or AIDS, and 40,000 Americans become infected with HIV each year.

AIDS has killed more than 500,000 Americans. Fifteen million children have been orphaned by the disease.

How is HIV spread?

HIV is not an easy virus to pass from one person to another. It is not spread through food or air (for instance, coughing or sneezing). There has never been a case where a person was infected by a relative, co-worker, or friend through everyday activities such as sharing dishes, bathrooms, or through hugging or kissing.

Testing the blood supply in the U.S. for HIV has eliminated almost any risk of infection through transfusions.

A person who has HIV carries the virus in certain body fluids including blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. The virus can be spread only if HIV-infected fluids enter the blood of another person.

HIV is most often spread through unprotected sex or sharing contaminated needles.

Any woman who is pregnant or may become pregnant and thinks she may have been exposed to HIV should get tested. Those who test positive can get drugs to prevent HIV from being passed on to the baby.

These women should not breast feed.

How can I reduce my risk of becoming infected?

If you are sexually active, protect yourself against HIV by practicing safer sex.

- Use a condom.
- Use only latex condoms.
- Use only water based lubricants.
- Use protection each and every time you have sex.

If you are injecting drugs of any type,

- Do not share syringes with anyone else.
- Disinfecting used needles and syringes with bleach can reduce the risk.
- Use only qualified professionals who use sterile equipment if you get a tattoo or have a body part pierced.

Are there treatments for HIV/AIDS?

- There is no vaccine or cure for HIV.
- Taking a combination of anti-HIV drugs can slow down the damaging effect of HIV on the body.
- Medication is used when needed to treat infection.
- Having a healthy lifestyle to keep the body as strong as possible is important.
- Emotional support for the person with HIV and those around them is very helpful.
- People with HIV need education about the disease so they can help make decisions with their health care providers.

Can you tell whether someone has HIV or AIDS?

NO! An infected person can appear completely healthy. But anyone infected with HIV can infect other people, even if they have no symptoms.

How can I know if I'm infected?

Some people may have symptoms of the flu, like sore throat, fever, swollen glands, aches or a rash. After a few weeks, these symptoms usually go away.

Immediately after infection, even if you look and feel healthy, you may be infected.

The only way to know for sure is to be tested.

Should I get tested?

If you think you might have been exposed to HIV, you should get tested as soon as possible.

How can I get tested?

Most people are tested by doctors, at local health departments, or in hospitals. It is important to get testing at a place that also provides counseling about HIV and AIDS. Most tests are able to detect HIV infection within four weeks of exposure, but it can sometimes take as long as three to six months.

Are some people at greater risk of HIV infection than others?

HIV does not discriminate. There are many who continue to participate in high risk behaviors. It is not who you are, but what you do that decides who may become infected.

