

HIV FACT SHEET

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WHAT IS HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is an incurable virus that attacks the body's immune system and, if left untreated, can develop into AIDs which is a late stage HIV infection.

HOW DOES IT SPREAD?

You can get HIV by having vaginal, anal, or oral (less common) sex with someone who has HIV, in addition to sharing needles and blood transfusions. Additionally, a pregnant person with untreated HIV can transfer the infection to their baby during pregnancy, childbirth, and breast/chest feeding.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Many individuals experience symptoms from HIV infection. Most individuals will experience flu-like symptoms within 2–4 weeks after their initial infection and those symptoms can last for days to several weeks. Symptoms can include:

- Sore throat;
- Fever;
- Night sweats;
- Skin rash;
- Swollen lymph nodes;
- Muscle aches; and
- Mouth ulcers

Other illnesses can cause similar symptoms and some people have no symptoms at all – the only way to know if you are positive for HIV is to get tested.

COMPLICATIONS OF HIV

HIV has stages, the third being referred to as AIDs, which is the most severe. Aside from transmission to other individuals, the transition to AIDs indicates that the individual has a badly damaged immune system which allows for an increasing number of opportunistic infections and other serious illnesses to impact the infected individual. Untreated HIV can lead to AIDs, further illness, and a shortened life expectancy.

WHO'S AT RISK?

Any sexually active individual can contract and spread HIV through unprotected vaginal, anal, and/or oral sex with a partner. In addition to unprotected sex, individuals who inject drugs and share needles are at higher risk. Having an open and honest conversation about your sexual and lifestyle practices with your health practitioner is always recommended for guidance specific to your sexual practices. It is recommended that:

- Clinicians test for HIV infection in all pregnant persons, including those who present in labor or at delivery whose HIV status is unknown.
- Clinicians screen for HIV infection in individuals aged 15 to 65 years. Younger individuals and older individuals who are at increased risk of infection should also be screened.

I'M PREGNANT – WHAT NOW?

If you are pregnant and positive for HIV, you can pass the infection to your child during pregnancy, via childbirth, and through breast/chest feeding. You and your health practitioner should discuss the things you can do to reduce the chance of infection for your baby, including:

- Choosing to have a c-section vs vaginal birth
- Putting your baby on an anti-HIV drug routine after birth
- Taking a combination of anti-HIV drugs during pregnancy

If you receive treatment during pregnancy, you can significantly reduce your baby's risk.

TEST OPTIONS

While HIV tests are very accurate, there is no test that can detect the virus immediately after infection – how soon a test can detect the virus will depend on the test type, of which there are 3: antibody tests, antigen/antibody tests, and nucleic acid tests (NAT):

- Antibody tests: these tests look for HIV antibodies in a person's blood or oral fluid – these tests typically can take 23 to 90 days to detect HIV after exposure.
- Antigen/antibody tests: these tests look for both the antibodies and antigens in a person's blood – these tests typically can detect HIV 18 to 45 days after exposure (the rapid antigen test can take 18 to 90 days after exposure).
- NAT tests: these tests look for the actual virus in the blood and are usually used for individuals who have had a recent exposure with or without symptoms that have tested negative with an antibody or antigen/antibody test – these tests typically can detect HIV 10 to 33 days after exposure.

TREATMENT OPTIONS

HIV infection can be treated, but not cured. Taking anti-HIV drugs (pills or shots) can help people with HIV infection stay healthy for a long time, potentially avoiding the virus transition to AIDS, and can decrease the chance of passing the virus to other individuals.

WHEN TO HAVE SEX AGAIN?

HIV is not curable but positive individuals can still have healthy sex lives without transmitting the virus to others. Sharing your status with your partner(s), having protected sex, and taking your HIV medicine as prescribed to help keep your viral load low are strongly encouraged – getting and maintaining an undetectable viral load prevents HIV transmission through sex.