

HIV/AIDS Facts



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 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.

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.



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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. Anyone who has unprotected sex, or 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 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 contracting HIV? Practice safer sex; 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 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 the health of you and your partner. 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. 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.



HIV/AIDS Testing Facts



What kinds of tests are available? There are several different types of HIV tests, but the two most common types are blood tests and oral swab tests. HIV blood tests use a sample of blood, either from a finger prick or a larger sample often taken from the inner arm, to test for antibodies. Oral tests use a swab to collect cells from inside the mouth to test for HIV antibodies. Traditional HIV test results can take one to two weeks to come back from a lab, but rapid tests are now widely available that can provide a result in about 20 minutes.

How does an HIV test work? Most HIV tests check for antibodies that the body produces once infected with HIV. Antibodies are proteins that the immune system produces to fight off all different kinds of infections, including HIV. It can take up to six months from the date of exposure for the body to develop enough antibodies to be detected. This time is considered the “window period,” during which a person could test negative for antibodies to HIV but still be infected and able to transmit the virus to others.

Who should get tested for HIV? The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends HIV testing for everyone between the ages of 13 and 64. Anyone who has engaged in behaviors that may have exposed them to HIV should be tested.

HIV testing is also recommended for all pregnant women as a routine part of prenatal care. A woman who has HIV and is pregnant can take certain medications during pregnancy that, combined with medical care, can significantly lower the chances of passing HIV to her baby.

Is an HIV test part of my routine physical? Even though HIV testing is recommended as part of routine medical care, many doctors do not offer testing for HIV (or other STDs) unless you specifically ask to be tested. If you are not comfortable talking with your regular health care provider about HIV and other STDs, or if you don't have a regular health care provider, there are many clinics that specialize in testing.

Will I be tested for HIV if I donate blood? When you donate blood, it is tested for HIV and other infections to make sure its safe for others to receive. This kind of testing is why the blood supply of the United States and other developed countries is so safe. Any blood found to be unhealthy in some way is not used. Also, you cannot get infected with HIV from donating blood.

If you want to be sure of your HIV status, the best way to find out is not by donating blood but by getting an HIV test. The results from HIV testing are more timely, and a care provider can link you to the right kind of care and resources if you do test positive.



HIV/AIDS Testing Facts



How much does an HIV test cost? The cost of HIV testing varies. Community clinics that offer tests for free or on a sliding scale are available in most areas. Also, the cost of an HIV test may be covered by health insurance, if you have it. Call ahead to your doctor or local clinic to find out how they charge for HIV tests, or to your health insurance provider to see if the test is covered.

I tested negative -- now what? If you are still in the “window period” than you’ll need to be re-tested to ensure you are indeed HIV negative. This also requires no other possible exposures during that six month period. Use condoms each and every time you have sex - vaginal, anal, or oral - no exceptions. Get tested regularly, talk to your partners about HIV and ask that they get tested too. If you use needles, don’t share them.

What if I test positive for HIV? The most important thing to do if you test positive is to get connected with services and support as soon as possible. Advances in HIV/AIDS treatment are occurring all the time, and medical treatment and a healthy lifestyle can help you stay well much longer than in the early years of the epidemic. The longer you wait after testing positive to see a health care provider, the greater your chance of developing serious health problems.

If you’ve tested positive, here are some important steps to take to protect your health:

- See a doctor, even if you don’t feel sick. If possible, see a doctor who has experience treating HIV. Consulting someone about your treatment options is the first step towards staying healthy.
- Find a support system. The emotional and physical challenges ahead can be difficult, and having people around to help is important. Ask your doctor about counselors and support groups that can help you.
- Talk with your partner(s). Tell them about your HIV status and make sure you reduce your risk of transmitting the virus by practicing safer sex, including using latex condoms or dental dams each and every time you have sex.

What about treatment? While there is not yet a cure, there are treatments available today that help those who are HIV positive live longer and healthier lives. Even if you are not having symptoms, it is important to consult a health care provider about the best course of treatment. Once you begin treatment it is important to keep taking your medications exactly as prescribed, even if you don’t feel sick, to avoid developing a resistance that may prevent medications from continuing to work for you.

For further information please consult your health care provider.



HIV/AIDS resources



Office of AIDS, California Department of Public Health: Programs, services, and activities relating to HIV: the assessment and prevention of HIV transmission and provision of care to HIV-positive Californians; www.cdph.ca.gov/aids

Aegis.com: A daily briefing of HIV news from around the world, updated hourly; www.aegis.com

AIDSHotline.org and California HIV/STD Referral Database: Comprehensive information about HIV via telephone or online: aidshotline.org; 800-367-AIDS (throughout California); 415-863-AIDS (San Francisco); 888-225-AIDS (TTY for hearing impaired); www.aidshotline.org

The Body: The complete HIV/AIDS Resource: Information and resources designed to lower barriers between patients and clinicians, demystify HIV and its treatment, improve patients' quality of life, and foster community through human connection; www.thebody.org

HIVandHepatitis.com: Online publication that provides accurate, timely and cutting-edge information about treatment for HIV, chronic hepatitis B and hepatitis C, and co-infection with HIV and these conditions; www.hivandhepatitis.com

HIV InSite: Comprehensive, up-to-date information on HIV and AIDS treatment, prevention, and policy from the University of California San Francisco School of Medicine; <http://hivinsite.ucsf.edu>

InSpot.org: Help for communicating about STDs and HIV: allows individuals to send e-card notification of STD or HIV exposure anonymously, and contains STD/HIV testing resources; www.inspot.org

Kaiser Family Foundation: Daily and weekly media briefings about HIV as well as information and resources about HIV for each U.S. state and for countries around the world; www.kff.org

Project Inform: Information, inspiration and advocacy for people living with HIV; www.projectinform.com

Project Open Hand: Non-profit organization offering "meals with love" to people living with HIV/AIDS and other serious illnesses and to seniors in San Francisco and Alameda Counties since 1985; www.openhand.org

