

HIV/AIDS

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a retrovirus that weakens the immune system, the body's defence against disease. Once the immune system is weak, serious infections and cancers develop in the body. When this happens, HIV infection is called Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Medicines can delay or stop HIV infection developing into AIDS.

How is HIV spread?

A person with HIV infection has the virus in their body fluids. The body fluids that have the highest levels of HIV are blood, semen (and pre-ejaculate), anal mucus, vaginal fluid and breast milk. HIV can spread if body fluids from an infected person enter the blood stream of another person.

HIV is most often spread by:

- sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal) with an infected person without using a condom
- sharing needles, syringes and other drug injecting equipment.

HIV can also be spread by:

- mother-to-baby transfer during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding.

This is uncommon in Australia and can be prevented with medical care

- infected blood products and medical equipment. In Australia, blood products are checked for HIV and medical equipment is sterilised or disinfected before use
- non-sterile body piercing and tattooing.

Signs and symptoms

When first infected with HIV, a person may develop flu-like symptoms such as tiredness, fever, headaches, skin rash and swollen glands. These symptoms usually go after a few weeks and the person may stay well for several years. Some people do not know they have HIV until they develop serious infections.

A person with HIV infection can give the virus to others, even if they have no symptoms.

When HIV has weakened a person's immune system so much that serious infections and cancers develop, their illness is called AIDS. It can take several years for HIV infection to progress to AIDS.

Symptoms of HIV/AIDS may be due to the HIV, or due to other infections that develop because the immune system is weak. Symptoms include:

- swollen lymph glands
- loss of appetite
- weight loss
- constant tiredness
- diarrhoea
- fevers, chills and night sweats
- symptoms of various infections.

HIV test

The only way to confirm HIV infection is a blood test which looks for antibodies to the virus. However, blood testing may not be able to detect HIV antibodies for a short period (up to three months) after the person has been first infected. This is called the window period. If you think you have been exposed to HIV, your doctor may recommend a test straight away and another test at a later date. During this window period, always have safe sex and do not donate blood.

Been in contact with HIV?

If you think you have been in contact with or exposed to HIV, contact a sexual health service, HIV/AIDS clinic or HIV/AIDS information service about Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP). PEP is a treatment with medicines that can stop HIV taking hold in the body. PEP should be started as early as possible and no later than 72 hours (3 days) after exposure.

PEP medicines can have unpleasant side effects. PEP cannot be used instead of safe sex.

Medicines

There is no vaccine or cure for HIV/AIDS. Medicines for HIV infection can improve quality of life and delay serious illness. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Medicines include:

- anti-retroviral medicines which reduce the activity of HIV in the body. These medicines can delay or stop the onset of AIDS. Treatment involves taking combinations of several anti-retroviral medicines to reduce the chances of the virus becoming resistant to treatment. Anti-retroviral medicines must be taken every day for life
- medicines to protect against infections and other illnesses that occur with AIDS
- medicines to treat infections and other illnesses that occur with AIDS.

Safe sex

Safe sex is sex that protects against catching or passing on HIV and other infections. It includes:

- limiting your sexual activity to the one, same partner. If either of you has or could have HIV, use condoms
- using condoms for all vaginal and anal sex. Condoms must be used correctly. A fresh condom should be used each time, with plenty of water-based lubricant
- kissing
- massage
- mutual masturbation
- using dildos or vibrators (never share them without cleaning them well between uses).

Oral sex is unlikely to spread HIV as long as there are no cuts or sores in the mouth. Avoid semen in the mouth, use a condom or use a dental dam if you or your sex partner have mouth ulcers, bleeding gums, have just brushed your teeth or have just flossed your teeth.

Self care

Protect yourself and others from infection.

- Have safe sex.
- Do not share injecting equipment and dispose of it safely.
- Do not share personal care items (e.g. razors, toothbrushes).

Important

HIV is a virus that does not survive for long outside the body. It can be killed by household bleach, or soap and warm water. HIV cannot be spread by:

- casual contact or touch
- kissing or hugging
- sweat, saliva or tears
- coughing, sneezing or spitting
- sharing eating and drinking utensils
- air conditioning
- toilets or showers
- swimming pools
- drinking bubblers
- mosquitoes or other biting insects.

- For body piercing or tattoos, make sure your provider uses sterile equipment.
- Cover wounds with a waterproof dressing.
- Wash hands well with soap and water after touching body fluids. If you do not have soap and water, use an alcohol-based hand sanitiser.
- If you are at risk of HIV infection, do not donate blood, organs or sperm.
- If you travel, remember that most countries have a much higher rate of HIV than Australia.
- If you are at risk of HIV infection, have an HIV test.

For more information

Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations

Phone: (02) 9557 9399

Website: www.afao.org.au

Multicultural HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C Service

Phone: (02) 9515 5030

Freecall 1800 108 098 (NSW country)

Website: www.mhahs.org.au

National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation

Phone: (02) 6246 9300

Website: www.naccho.org.au

National Association of People living with AIDS, Australia

Phone: 1800 259 666

Website: www.napwa.org.au

PEP

Website: www.getpep.info

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia

Website: www.shfpa.org.au

Healthdirect Australia

Phone: 1800 022 222

Website: www.healthdirect.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI)

Your pharmacist can advise on CMI leaflets.

NPS Medicine Wise Medicines Information Line

Phone: 1300 MEDICINE (1300 633 424)

Website: www.nps.org.au

The Poisons Information Centre

In case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia.

***Pharmacists are medicines experts.
Ask a pharmacist for advice when
choosing a medicine.***

Related fact cards

- » *Contraception*
- » *Genital Herpes*
- » *Safer Injecting Practices*
(electronic only – ask your pharmacist)

Your Self Care Pharmacy: