

HIV - Facts

What is HIV?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) attacks the immune system making the body more prone to illness. When the immune system is sufficiently weakened, certain opportunistic infections may develop and this stage is classified as Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

How is HIV passed on?

HIV is transmitted in body fluids such as semen, genital fluids (vaginal and cervical secretions, pre-ejaculate and rectal secretions), blood and breast milk and through sharing drug injection needles. It can also be transmitted from a mother to her unborn baby or during child birth. Evidence suggests anal sex carries the highest risk, followed by vaginal sex. You cannot catch HIV when coming into contact with sweat, urine, tears, faeces and saliva. It is safe to share cutlery, toilet seats, cups and plates. There is a small risk of catching HIV through oral sex, especially if the lining of the mouth is not healthy.

What are the symptoms?

There are several phases of HIV:

Seroconversion/Acute/Primary HIV - Within the first 45 days of becoming infected your body starts to make antibodies against HIV. This is your body's first line of defence where the white cells release molecules that are specifically aimed at binding with a foreign body such as a bacteria or viruses and facilitating their destruction. During this stage you may experience flu-like symptoms such as fever, sweats, a cough, diarrhoea, aches and pains, headaches and mouth ulcers. This stage may go unnoticed and therefore not recognised.

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Asymptomatic phase

After the seroconversion phase there may be several years when you have no symptoms at all. During this time, the virus remains active and continues to weaken the immune system.

Symptomatic phase

The body's immune system does not respond normally to infections and is more susceptible to frequent or serious infections and certain types of cancer. There may also be non-specific symptoms such as weight loss, fatigue, diarrhoea, skin rash and swollen glands.

AIDS

A syndrome which is characterised by serious illness caused by opportunistic infections. Opportunistic Infections are infections caused by bacteria or viruses which are usually eliminated by the immune system, but can cause illness if the immune system does not work correctly.

How is HIV diagnosed?

HIV is diagnosed from a blood sample taken at least 28 days after having unprotected sexual intercourse. This test is available at all Nuffield Wellbeing Centres. Other tests for HIV exist such as saliva and finger prick tests, however these are not always accurate.

Why should HIV be treated?

Left untreated HIV will weaken the immune system and make the body more vulnerable to infections and certain types of cancer. It is eventually life threatening. Without treatment, the viral load (the quantity of the HIV virus in the body) is higher and the person is more infectious.

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How is HIV treated?

Although there is no cure for HIV, there are many effective treatments (antiretroviral drugs) which reduce the viral load and keep the virus from reproducing. With the appropriate HIV medications an HIV positive person can live a long and healthy life.

HIV requires treatment through a Specialist in HIV medicine.

If you had unprotected sexual contact with someone who is HIV positive, your GUM/HIV clinic or Hospital Accident and Emergency department can offer post exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which is best taken within 24 hours. PEP is not guaranteed to work, but has a high success rate.

Do I have to tell my partner?

It is important to notify your sexual partners to protect them against contracting the HIV virus. It is important for your partners to be tested for HIV themselves. It is a criminal offence to transmit HIV knowingly. A trained Sexual Health Adviser at your local GUM clinic can help you identify and contact your sexual partners.

Where can I find more advice?

There are a number of support groups who can help with information on HIV and support after diagnosis. Here are some helpful websites:

- The Terrence Higgins Trust: www.thtorg.uk
- Positively UK: www.positivelyuk.org
- George House Trust: www.gh.org.uk

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- Nam Aidsmap: www.aidsmap.com
- Mambo: www.mambo.org.uk
- Living Well: www.livingwellcic.com/what-we-do/hiv-services/
- Naz: www.naz.org.uk
- Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com/advice-and-guidance/

If you would like to book a HIV test or consultation simply call our dedicated client services team on 0333 920 1607 or email sexualhealth@nuffieldhealth.com