

AIDS/HIV

Information Sheet

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. It is caused by a virus called the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, or HIV. HIV breaks down the body's defences against disease (immune system). When these defences become weak and stop working, the body cannot fight off certain infections and cancers. The person with a damaged immune system then becomes ill and could die due to these infections.

Does everyone who has the virus have AIDS?

No. Many people are infected with HIV, but have not signs or symptoms of illness. Some people may have the virus and do not know it. They may be "positive" for HIV, but they look and feel healthy. Once a person is infected with the virus, it can take anywhere from a few months to many years to become ill. Most people who are HIV infected will eventually become seriously ill and die.

How is HIV spread?

The virus is carried in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. To become infected with HIV, the virus must have direct access to your bloodstream. At least 1/4 cc of infected blood is required to spread the infection.

The virus is not spread by ordinary, everyday contact with people at work, in school, or the general public. You cannot get AIDS from telephones, toilet seats, swimming pools, whirlpools, hugging, sharing eating utensils, or riding on the bus or subway with someone who is infected.

Outside the body, the virus is very fragile. It is easily destroyed by household detergents, chlorine bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts water), heat, rubbing alcohol, or hydrogen peroxide.

AIDS IS HARD TO GET!

HIV is mostly spread by sexual intercourse with an infected person, so sharing needles and syringes that contain blood infected with the virus. The virus can also be passed from an infected mother to her unborn child. Treatment of the mother during pregnancy can significantly decrease the risk of passing on the virus. In the past, HIV was spread via blood transfusions; however, in Canada this is now very unlikely since the blood supply is screened for evidence of HIV infection.

Remember:

The virus must get directly into the bloodstream in order to cause infection.

Who can get AIDS?

Viruses don't discriminate. Anyone can be infected by the virus that causes AIDS. In Central Africa where AIDS is very common, it affects men and women equally.

It is the sharing of infected body fluids which transmits this virus. Anyone who participates in activities without preventing the sharing of such fluids may be at risk of becoming infected.

What can I do to protect myself?

First, you can protect yourself by understanding how the virus is spread and avoiding the activities that could put you at risk:

- Sexual intercourse with an infected person
- Unprotected sexual intercourse with a person at risk (e.g. intravenous drug user, multiple sexual partners, or blood transfusions prior to November 1985)
- Sharing needles and syringes, including those used for tattooing and piercing

Second, make sure you understand and practice the infection control procedures developed for your workplace. Follow routine practices and use other protective equipment every time an exposure to blood and body fluids may occur. Remember! You can't tell who is infected by looking at the person.

There is no vaccine against HIV; therefore, it is important to understand fully how the virus is spread and how to protect yourself.

Is there a test for AIDS?

You can be tested to see if HIV has entered your body. The virus leaves markers, or footprints of itself in your body – these markers are called antibodies. When someone is infected with HIV, it can take up to 14 weeks for these antibodies to appear. A simple blood test can be done to detect the presence of antibodies to HIV. If antibodies are found, the test is positive for HIV. If no antibodies are found, the test is negative for HIV.

What does a positive test mean?

A positive test means that there are antibodies to the virus in your blood. Therefore, at some point you were infected with HIV and may now pass it on to other people. A positive test does not mean that you have AIDS.

If you have been infected with HIV, you may need to make some changes in your behaviour to prevent passing the virus to others. Your doctor or sexual health clinic will help you make those changes, but you must practice safer sex and you should not share needles nor donate blood.

What does a negative test mean?

A negative test means that no antibodies to HIV were found in your blood at the time of testing. This does not mean that you are not infected. Remember! It can take up to 14 weeks for the antibodies of HIV to appear after infection. This is why most doctors and clinics ask you to wait 14 weeks after your last risky exposure to be tested.

If you felt you were at risk before taking the test, you could still be at risk. The people you have sex with, or share needles with may also be at risk.

Practice safer sex, don't share needles and syringes and don't donate blood!

Where do I go to be tested?

If you decide to be tested, visit your local sexual health clinic or your doctor. Make sure you speak to a counselor both before and after you have the test. The test and the results are completely confidential.