

The Basics

Human immunodeficiency virus, or HIV, is the virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. A person can become infected with HIV by coming into direct contact with HIV-infected bodily fluids, including blood, semen and genital secretions. An HIV-infected mother can pass the virus to her child during pregnancy, birth or breast feeding.

HIV is spread through unprotected sex with someone infected with HIV or by sharing needles used to take intravenous drugs. It is not spread by touching someone who has HIV, through toilet seats or by sharing common objects, such as cups or dishes, with someone who has HIV.

New guidelines suggest that everyone 15 to 65 years old should be tested for HIV at least once. People who have had unprotected sex or multiple partners or who have shared needles should be tested more regularly.

Having HIV does not mean that a person will get AIDS. Anti-HIV medicines can keep HIV from advancing to AIDS.

If you think you have been exposed to HIV, it is important to get tested immediately.

Ask for Answers

Asking the right questions and partnering with a doctor can provide answers, advice and information.

- How can people get tested for HIV/AIDS?
- What should someone do if they have HIV?
- What medicines are available for treating HIV?
- When should a person with HIV start taking medicine?
- What should a person with HIV do before he or she starts taking medicine?



What's Next?

If you or someone you care for tests positive for HIV, there are some steps that can be taken immediately.

- **Prevent HIV transmission.** Do not have unprotected sex or share needles or syringes. Do not share razors, toothbrushes or items that may have blood on them. Nursing mothers should not breast-feed
- **Work with a doctor.** Find a doctor with experience treating HIV/AIDS. Ask questions. People with HIV should feel comfortable discussing their health and lifestyle with their doctor because they will make many decisions together regarding treatment
- **Discuss treatment options.** Treatment with medicine may not start immediately. Doctors consider factors such as a person's overall health and readiness to start treatment before they prescribe medicine. It is a big step because people who take HIV medicine often must take it for the rest of their lives

Taking Medicine

If you have HIV, you and your doctor will decide when the time is right for you to take medicine and which medicine to take. Just as important is your commitment to taking that medicine every day for the rest of your life. This commitment is called "adherence." Good adherence accomplishes two goals:

- **Reduces viral load.** When you skip a dose, HIV can multiply rapidly
- **Prevents drug resistance:** Skipping a dose gives HIV a chance to mutate, or change form. It becomes resistant to certain anti-HIV medicines, making those medicines ineffective

Did you know?

There are four stages of HIV infection.

- **Acute:** It takes two to four weeks after exposure for the body to produce enough of the virus to appear in an HIV test. HIV is highly infectious during this time. Although some may experience flu-like symptoms—fever, sore throat, rash—testing is the only way to detect HIV infection

- **Asymptomatic:** Symptoms go away. People in this stage may not even know they have HIV even though they can pass it to others. During this period, HIV destroys the body's infection-fighting CD4 cells. As the number of CD4 cells decreases, it becomes harder for the body to fight infections
- **Symptomatic:** Signs or symptoms of the infection appear
- **AIDS:** This stage occurs when the number of CD4 cells, or CD4 count, is less than 200 cells/mm³ or when an AIDS-defining condition—such as pneumonia or tuberculosis—appears

Get Support

Here are some resources where you can find more information on HIV/AIDS.

National Institutes of Health

www.aidsinfo.nih.gov

Information on HIV/AIDS treatment, prevention and research

National HIV and STD Testing Resources

<http://hivtest.cdc.gov>

Provides information on testing locations in the United States

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/hiv

Tools and resources for preventing and treating HIV/AIDS

U.S. Government

www.aids.gov

Information on federal HIV policies, programs and resources

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