

# Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

## What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that destroys cells vital to a person's immune system. It robs the body of its ability to fight other infections and illnesses and makes the immune system weaker. When this happens, other infections occur and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) develops. AIDS is the advanced stage of HIV infection.

## How is HIV spread?

- Having unprotected vaginal, oral, or anal sex with someone who has HIV
- Sharing needles or other drug use equipment (i.e. cookers and pipes) with someone who has HIV
- Blood transfusions or organ transplants before 1985 (since November 1985 in Canada, all blood and blood products are tested for HIV)
- During pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding, the HIV virus can be passed from parent to child
- Tattooing, skin piercing, or acupuncture with unsterilized needles that have been in contact with the virus

## HIV cannot be spread by:

- Sweat, spit, tears, clothes, phones, toilet seats, or drinking fountains
- Mosquitoes or other insects that have been in contact with infected blood
- By touching or hugging someone who is HIV positive or by working, living, or having non-sexual contact with someone who is HIV positive

## What are the symptoms of HIV?

Some people may experience mild flu-like symptoms (chills, fever, fatigue, body aches, headaches, sore throat, swollen lymph nodes, rash) 2 to 6 weeks after infection with HIV, these symptoms may last days to weeks. Most people then have no symptoms for years.

Once the immune system is weakened, the following symptoms may develop:

- Fever or night sweats
- Joint or muscle pain
- Lesions on the skin, mouth, or genitals
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Fatigue
- Rapid and unexplained weight loss
- Chronic diarrhea
- Recurrent infections (i.e., pneumonia, yeast infections)

## How can I be tested for HIV?

Testing for HIV is done through a blood test. The HIV blood test looks for HIV antibodies. Antibodies are the body's response to infection; they are found in the blood when someone has been exposed to the virus. HIV antibodies can take up to 6 weeks to show up in the blood after someone has been infected, this period after exposure and before the presence of antibodies is called the window period. If 6 weeks have not passed since the exposure or a person has a negative test before 6 weeks have passed, the test must be repeated when the window period of 6 weeks is over. If antibodies are detected in your blood, this means you are HIV positive.

## How is HIV treated?

There are medications a person can take if they are HIV positive to help keep their immune system healthy and slow the progression of the disease, these medications are called antiretroviral therapy. Treatment for HIV/AIDS requires a commitment to manage the infection and to be monitored closely by a health care provider.

## What about partners?

Notifying partners is very important. Individuals who test positive for HIV are asked to tell all sexual partners so they can be tested. A public health nurse can help contact sexual partners as needed.

## Things to think about:

After infection, people may not feel or look sick for years. However, they can still pass HIV on to others. Over time, the immune system becomes damaged and people with HIV become sick with various illnesses. Most experts agree that HIV is considered a long-term chronic disease and many people with HIV can expect to live a normal life expectancy with specialized care and support from a healthcare team.

## How can I reduce my chances of getting and spreading HIV?

- Reduce your number of sexual partners
- Use a condom or dental dam every time you have sex (oral, anal, and vaginal)
- Avoid sharing needles or other drug use equipment
- Do not share sex toys
- Ensure that acupuncture, tattoo, and body piercing establishments use sterilized needles and equipment
- If you are at risk of being exposed to HIV, consult with a healthcare provider about pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to prevent transmission
- If you have had or may have had an exposure to HIV, go to the hospital emergency department within 72 hours to discuss post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) with a healthcare provider. PEP can reduce the risk of transmission.

## More ways to reduce your risk of STIs:

- Get tested regularly, including after unprotected sex and using substances by injection, inhalation, or snorting
- Get vaccinated against hepatitis A, B, and HPV
- Talk with partners about STIs and safe sex to keep one another protected

**For more information, please contact The Clinic at 519-663-5317.**

### References:

Ontario HIV Treatment Network (OHTN), Ontario Ministry of Health, Public Health Ontario, Ontario College of Family Physicians, Ontario-based clinicians and testing providers. (2023). *Ontario Guidelines for Providers Offering HIV Testing*. HIVTestingOntario. <https://hivtestingontario.ca/ontario-guidelines-for-providers-offering-hiv-testing/>

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada. (n.d.). *HIV*. Sex & U. <https://www.sexandu.ca/stis/hiv/>

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