



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HIV/AIDS

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV attacks the body's immune system, specifically the CD4 cells (T-cells). This causes the body to be vulnerable to other infections and cancers HIV infection can be managed with medication, but cannot be cured. Once you are infected with HIV, you will have it for life.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS is short for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. AIDS is a life-threatening condition caused by the HIV virus. Not all HIV infections will develop into AIDS. AIDS may take many years to develop from the time of the initial infection. If infected people get treatment, HIV can be managed.

Signs and symptoms of AIDS include soaking night sweats, recurring fever, chronic diarrhoea, persistent white spots or unusual lesions in the mouth, persistent unexplained fatigue, weight loss and skin rashes or lumps.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HIV?

The early symptoms of HIV infection occurs within a couple of weeks to a month after exposure to the virus and include fever, headache, fatigue, rash, sore joints/muscles and a sore throat. HIV infected people may remain asymptomatic for many years until the immune system is sufficiently affected and more susceptible to infections.

HOW IS HIV TRANSMITTED?

- **Unprotected Vaginal Sex:** HIV can be transmitted from a woman to a man or vice versa. Open cuts and sores increase the risk.
- **Unprotected Anal Sex:** Higher risk than vaginal sex because the lining of the anus is more likely to tear, creating an entry point for HIV.
- **Unprotected Oral Sex:** The risk is less. If there are sores in/ around the mouth or on the receiving partner's genitals the virus can be transmitted.
- **Injecting drugs:** Shared unsterilized equipment can carry infected blood. Contaminated and used needles used for body piercing and tattooing can carry a risk.



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- **Blood transfusions/transplants:** All donated blood should be tested for HIV; any untested blood carries a risk of transmission. In South Africa, donated blood is tested to ensure patient safety.
- **Mother-to-child:** Transmission can occur during pregnancy, labour, delivery or breastfeeding if treatment is not taken correctly.
- **Needle stick or body fluid splashes:** Healthcare workers are often exposed to HIV due to the nature of their profession and can become infected by needle stick injuries or body fluid splashes in the eye or in the mouth.

WHO IS MOST AT RISK OF HIV EXPOSURE?

Anyone of any age, race, sex or sexual orientation is at risk for HIV exposure, but your risk is far greater if you have unprotected sex or share needles.

HOW DO YOU TEST FOR HIV INFECTION?

HIV is diagnosed by testing blood or a sample of cells for the presence of the antibodies of the HIV virus. A finger prick test can be done, called a Rapid test. If this test result is positive, a follow up test will be required to confirm the HIV diagnosis.

HOW LONG AFTER EXPOSURE SHOULD I BE TESTED FOR HIV?

Some HIV tests are not accurate enough immediately after infection as it depends on the amount of antibodies produced by the virus inside the body. It can take from 3 to 12 weeks before enough antibodies are produced to get an accurate enough result.

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HOW CAN I REDUCE MY RISK?

- Get tested and know your partner's HIV status. Talk to your partner about HIV testing and get tested before you have sex.
- Have less risky sex. HIV is mainly spread by having anal or vaginal sex without a condom or without taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV.
- Use condoms. Use a condom correctly every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex.
- Limit your number of sexual partners. The more partners you have, the more likely you are to have a partner with HIV whose HIV is not well controlled or to have a partner with a sexually transmitted disease (STD). Both of these factors can increase the risk of HIV transmission. If you have more than one sexual partner, get tested for HIV regularly.
- Get tested and treated for STDs. Insist that your partners get tested and treated too. Having an STD can increase your risk of becoming infected with HIV or spreading it to others.
- Don't inject drugs. But if you do, use only sterile drug injection equipment and water and never share your equipment with others.

References:

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The information is shared on condition that readers will make their own determination, including seeking advice from a professional. E&OE.



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