

HIV infection and AIDS

Patient education

What is HIV infection and AIDS?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system and destroys important cells that fight off infections and diseases. HIV is a manageable chronic condition. However, if left untreated, an HIV infection can progress to its last and most severe phase: acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS). People with AIDS have badly damaged immune systems and are likely to get other infections or serious illnesses.

What causes HIV infection and AIDS?

HIV is found in the blood and body fluids of infected people and can be spread from person to person through unprotected oral, anal, and vaginal sex and/or by sharing HIV-contaminated needles or syringes. HIV can also spread from an infected mother to the baby during pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding. HIV is not spread by every form of social contact, such as hugging and shaking hands.

What increases the risks?

Those at an increased risk for HIV/AIDS include:

- Injection drug users
- Infants born to an infected mother
- People that participate in unprotected sexual intercourse with a partner experiencing sexually transmitted disease

How can I avoid getting and spreading HIV/AIDS?

- Practicing safer sex by using condoms.
- Getting tested and asking your partner to get tested before engaging in sexual activities.
- Treating all blood and body fluids as potentially infectious.

How do I know that I have HIV infection and AIDS?

Some people with an HIV infection do not develop any symptoms and can still spread the disease to others. However, the majority of people living with HIV develop mild symptoms that may appear within two to four weeks after being infected with HIV. Symptoms may include:

- Chills
- Fever
- Muscle aches and joint pain
- Headache
- Sore throat
- Swollen lymph nodes
- Fatigue
- Stomach aches
- Skin rash
- Night sweats

Health care providers can determine if you have HIV by assessing your symptoms and ordering a blood test and/or an HIV antibody test. A positive test result means that you have been infected with HIV and that you can spread it to other people. Some tests may not detect the virus during the first few weeks of an HIV infection; however, you can still spread the virus to others during this infectious stage.

How is this treated?

Symptoms of HIV can last from a few days to several weeks and may go away on their own. However, the virus remains in your body for life.

Although there is no cure for HIV/AIDS, there are highly effective treatments available to manage HIV infections. Your health care provider may prescribe antiretroviral medications as part of antiretroviral therapy (ART).

These medications can:

- Lower the level of HIV in your body.
- Slow and prevent the progression of disease.
- Help the immune system fight off other infections and diseases.
- Improve the health and quality of life for people living with HIV.
- Prevent HIV transmission.

If you are experiencing any of the following, please contact your health care provider and/or call 911 immediately:

- Significant weight loss
- A rash with peeling skin and blisters inside your mouth
- Abdominal pain
- A persistent headache
- High fever and chills (temperature equal to or greater than 38°C)
- Extreme fatigue
- Muscle pain or joint pain
- Mental and behavioral confusion
- Vomiting or diarrhea that does not improve
- Trouble swallowing
- Swelling around your eyes or eye redness
- Shortness of breath
- Vision changes, such as decreased or blurred vision
- Problems related to your medicine(s)

Where can I get more information?

About HIV and AIDS: <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/hiv-aids.html>

References:

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