



OFFICE OF POPULATION AFFAIRS

# Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) THE FACTS



# Human Immunodeficiency Virus THE FACTS



## What is HIV?

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV damages white blood cells (CD4+ or T cells) that are very important and help the body fight infection and disease. As HIV infection progresses, people have fewer of these cells in their blood and the immune system becomes weak and damaged. When this happens, HIV can lead to AIDS, or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

## How do people get HIV?

HIV is spread through body fluids such as blood, semen, pre-seminal fluid, vaginal fluids, and breast milk from a person who is infected with HIV. HIV is primarily spread by:



- Not using a condom when having sex with a person who has HIV. All unprotected sex with someone who has HIV poses some risk.
- Having multiple sex partners or the presence of other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) can increase the risk of infection during sex. Unprotected oral sex can also be a risk for HIV transmission, but it is a much lower risk than anal or vaginal sex.
- Sharing needles, syringes or other equipment used to prepare illicit drugs for injection.
- Being born to an infected mother—HIV can be passed from mother to child during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding.
- Healthcare workers exposed to infectious body fluids, most often through needle-sticks, have a very small risk of getting HIV as a result. They may, however, benefit from post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP, a 1-month regimen of two or three antiretroviral drugs. For more information, go to [AIDS.gov](https://www.aids.gov)'s post-exposure prophylaxis page.
- Patients receiving blood transfusions or organ/tissue transplants are at an extremely low risk of contracting HIV.

HIV is not transmitted by day-to-day contact in social settings, schools or in the workplace, such as, shaking someone's hand or hugging them, kissing, using the same toilet, sheets, towels, eating utensils or drinking from the same glass or playing sports.



# Human Immunodeficiency Virus

## THE FACTS



### How common is HIV?

- Currently, 1.1 million people are living with HIV in the U.S.
- Nearly one in five of those (18%) are unaware of their infection.
- Approximately 50,000 Americans become newly infected with HIV each year.
- Nearly 18,000 people with AIDS still die each year in the United States. HIV affects people from all backgrounds. Anyone who has unprotected sex can be at risk regardless of age, race, gender, or sexual orientation, although some groups are at higher risk.
- Social factors such as poverty, discrimination, stigma, and lack of access to health care put communities of color at increased risk.
- About 44% of all new HIV infections occur in African-Americans, for example, even though they comprise only about 12% of the U.S. population.
- Gay and bisexual men account for 61% of all new HIV cases and about 49% of those currently living with the virus.
- Women account for one in four people – 295,000 living with HIV in the U.S. Women of color and younger women are hit especially hard.

### What are the stages of HIV?

**Acute HIV Infection:** Some people develop flu-like symptoms early after infection, usually in a few weeks up to a month. Not everyone feels ill, though, and symptoms might be mild. At this point the immune system is beginning to respond to the virus.

**Latent or Asymptomatic HIV Infection:** After a few weeks, the level of HIV in the blood decreases and people enter a latent or asymptomatic stage. During this stage – which can last 8 to 10 years – a person usually feels fine. The virus is still active, though, and can be spread to others.

**Symptomatic HIV Infection:** The immune system weakens and symptoms of opportunistic infections develop; these infections are more likely to occur in someone with a weakened immune system.



# Human Immunodeficiency Virus THE FACTS



AIDS: HIV infection that is not treated leads to AIDS. At this stage, the immune system is severely weakened and serious illnesses emerge. An AIDS diagnosis can be made when someone who has HIV develops an opportunistic infection or has a CD4+ count below 200 (this is the number or "count" of CD4+ cells in small sample of blood). A normal CD4 count is between 500 and 1000.

## Testing/Diagnosis



- CDC recommends that everyone aged 13-64 years get tested for HIV at least once in their life and that people at higher risk (because of risky sex or injection drug use) get tested at least once a year. A negative HIV test result "expires" with each risky act.
- Most HIV tests done in the U.S. detect antibodies—substances the body's immune system produces in response to the infection. HIV is most often detected by testing blood, but some tests use urine samples or take a swab of fluid from inside the mouth. Some rapid HIV tests can provide results in as little as 20 minutes.
- Most tests can detect the disease 2-8 weeks after infection, but in some people detection takes longer. The disease can be detected in almost everyone with HIV three months after infection, so it's a good idea for anyone tested earlier than that to have a follow-up test at three months.
- Many types of clinics offer HIV tests. To find a clinic in your area, go to <https://locator.aids.gov> to find a testing site near you. Many Title X family planning clinics offer HIV testing and may be found via the links above or at <http://www.hhs.gov/opa/>. For more information on testing, please visit <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/testing/resources/qa/index.htm>.



## What is the treatment for HIV?

HIV treatment options can vary greatly from person to person, so talk with your health care provider about what is best for you. If you are newly diagnosed, timely treatment is key to managing your HIV infection well. Recent advances in HIV treatments can help people living with HIV infection experience long and productive lives. CDC and other government agencies continue to work on a variety of treatment-related activities. For specific information on HIV treatment, please visit [CDC's HIV Treatment web page](#).



# Human Immunodeficiency Virus

## THE FACTS



### Reduce your risk

HIV is generally passed from person to person through sexual (anal, vaginal, or oral) contact or by sharing needles and other drug works. HIV can be prevented through:

- **Abstinence** - Abstaining from sex means not having any type of sex at all—oral, anal, or vaginal. The decision to practice abstinence does not mean that you should not know about condoms and safe sex practices. Most people stop being abstinent at some point in their lives. Learning how to protect yourself from HIV allows you to be prepared in case you decide to have sex.
- **Monogamy** - Mutual monogamy means that you agree to be sexually active with only one person, and that person is sexually active only with you. Reducing your number of sexual partners can decrease your risk for HIV. It is still important that you and your partner get tested for HIV and share your test results with each other. Many people choose to continue using condoms in a mutually monogamous relationship for further protection from HIV and other STDs, as well as to prevent unintended pregnancy.
- **Condoms** - When used consistently and correctly, condoms are highly effective in preventing HIV infection. If you are sexually active, latex condoms provide the best protection against HIV infection. Polyurethane or plastic condoms may also be used and are good options for people with latex allergies. Natural membrane (such as lambskin) condoms are porous, meaning that fluids can seep through them, and therefore do not offer the same level of protection against HIV and other STDs.
- Go to <http://www.cdc.gov/condomeffectiveness/brief.html> for more on how to use a condom correctly.
- If you inject drugs, don't share needles, syringes, or "works." Only use syringes from a source you can trust, such as a pharmacy.

### Talk to your partner

- If you are diagnosed with HIV, anyone you've had sex with or shared injection drug equipment with needs to know your HIV status. Talking about HIV is hard, but it's the best thing you can do to help others protect their health. You don't have to do this alone. Your local health department will usually contact your partners and talk to them about getting tested, without revealing your name.



# Human Immunodeficiency Virus THE FACTS



- It is also important to tell any future partners about your status and to practice safer sex. Using condoms correctly each time you have sex helps prevent transmission of HIV and other STDs and greatly reduces the risk of unintended pregnancy.

## Sources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- [HIV/AIDS Basics](#)

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