

HIV/AIDS 101



Did you know that one in five Americans living with HIV today doesn't know it? The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends everyone get tested for HIV as a matter of routine health care. If you haven't been tested, you're not alone. Knowing your status is important whether you are HIV positive or not. Early diagnosis and treatment saves lives. And, if you are HIV negative it's important to stay that way. Check out these FAQs about HIV/AIDS.

What is HIV?

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus, commonly known as HIV, is spread when infected bodily fluids from one person enter another person's body. Pre-cum, semen, vaginal fluids, blood, and breast milk are the fluids that can transmit the virus. Unprotected sex is the most common way people get infected with HIV in the U.S., followed by sharing needles.

HIV attacks the very cells which normally defend the body against illness. Without treatment, HIV can eventually weaken the immune system to such an extent that the body can no longer fight off other diseases and infections.

What is AIDS?

AIDS, or Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome, is the most advanced stage of HIV. There are two ways that doctors decide when a person infected with HIV is considered to have advanced to an AIDS diagnosis:

1. From other infections: When a person's immune system is so weakened by HIV that one or more specific illnesses, called opportunistic infections, takes hold. These illnesses do not generally affect a person with a healthy immune system.
2. From certain blood tests: When the number of healthy immune system cells in an HIV positive person's body drops to a certain low point.

The key to slowing the progression of HIV to AIDS is early testing, care and treatment. Today, effective medicines can help people with HIV stay healthy for years, even decades.

Is there a difference between HIV and AIDS?

HIV is the virus that infects the body and AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV infection. So, not everyone who has HIV has AIDS, but, everyone who has AIDS is infected with HIV.

How quickly someone with HIV advances to AIDS depends on many different factors. One important factor is how soon after HIV infection a person is diagnosed and gets into care. Also, just like any other health problem, different people's bodies respond differently to HIV. So, it is important to get tested, get care if you are positive and protect yourself and your partner(s).

How does someone get HIV?

HIV is primarily spread through unprotected sexual contact, that is, vaginal, anal, or oral sex. Certain bodily fluids that can be shared between people during unprotected sex, such as semen, pre-cum, vaginal fluids or blood can contain the virus. The chances of getting or passing HIV from oral sex are lower than vaginal or anal sex, but there is still a risk. HIV can also be spread by sharing needles, as blood can contain the virus. Women who are HIV positive can pass HIV to their baby before or during delivery or through breastfeeding after birth. Antiviral medications are available, however, that greatly reduce the chance of an HIV positive mother passing HIV to her baby.

Saliva, tears or sweat have never been shown to transmit HIV. Kissing is also safe (open mouth kissing is considered very low risk). HIV is not spread through casual contact like holding hands or hugging, or by sharing drinks or sitting on toilet seats.

Who is at risk for HIV?

Often, people don't think of themselves or their partners as being at risk, so they don't worry about using protection or getting tested. But anyone who has had unprotected sex, or who has injected drugs, or has had a partner who has done either of these things, or whose partner's other partners may have done these things, may be at risk.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that one in five people in the U.S. who are HIV positive don't know it. The CDC recommends routine HIV testing for everyone between the ages of 13 and 64. This does not mean though that testing is done automatically when you see a health care provider even if you have blood drawn. The only way to know for sure you are being tested is to ask to be tested.

What is the link between HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)?

People with other STDs (such as chlamydia, gonorrhea, genital herpes or syphilis) are at greater risk of getting HIV if they have unprotected sex with someone who is HIV positive. In addition, if someone with HIV is also infected with another STD, he or she is more likely to transmit the virus through sexual contact.

The only way to know if you have an STD is to get tested. Many STDs are curable, and all are treatable. Getting treated for STDs can help prevent more serious health effects and reduce your risk of contracting HIV if you are exposed.

How do I reduce my risk of getting HIV?

Use condoms each and every time you have sex. When used consistently and correctly condoms are considered highly effective in preventing the spread of HIV and also protecting against many other STDs. If you do use needles don't share them. (cont...)

It is also important to know your own and your partner's HIV status. By knowing if you have HIV, or another STD, you can take precautions to protect your own health and your partners. Get tested regularly, especially before starting a new relationship.

Is there a vaccine or cure for HIV?

There is no vaccine to prevent HIV or cure for those who are already infected. But there are medications available that have helped many people with HIV to live long and healthy lives. For someone who is HIV positive, it is important to know as soon as possible so you can work with your doctor to determine the best treatment for you.

Who should get tested for HIV?

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends HIV testing for everyone between the ages of 13 and 64. This does not mean though that testing is done automatically when you see a health care provider even if you have blood drawn. The only way to know for sure you are being tested is to ask to be tested. HIV testing is also recommended for all pregnant women as a routine part of prenatal care. A woman who has HIV and is pregnant can take certain medications during pregnancy that, combined with medical care, can significantly lower the chances of passing HIV to her baby.

How does an HIV test work?

Most HIV tests check for antibodies that the body produces once infected with HIV. Antibodies are proteins that the immune system produces to fight off all different kinds of infections, including HIV. If an HIV test detects HIV antibodies, a person is infected with HIV.

If antibodies are not present, a person is likely not HIV infected. But, it can take as long as three to six months for the body to develop enough antibodies to be measurable on a test. The time period between HIV exposure and a positive test is called the window period, during which you could test negative for HIV but still be infected and able to transmit the virus to others. Therefore, it is important to get tested (or re-tested) after a sufficient period of time has passed to know for sure.

What kinds of HIV tests are available?

There are several different types of HIV tests, but the two most common types are blood tests and oral swab tests. HIV blood tests use a sample of blood, either from a finger prick or a larger sample often taken from the inner arm, to test for antibodies. Oral tests use a swab to collect cells from inside the mouth to test for HIV antibodies. Traditional HIV test results can take one to two weeks to come back from a lab, but rapid tests are now widely available that can provide a result in about 20 minutes.

Is an HIV test part of my routine physical?

Even though HIV testing is recommended as part of routine medical care, many doctors do not offer testing for HIV or other STDs unless you specifically ask to be tested. If you are not comfortable talking with your regular health care provider about STDs, or if you don't have a regular health care provider, there are many clinics that specialize in testing.

Who has access to my results?

Your HIV test results are confidential. The results will be included in your medical record, as are the results for any other type of test. If you test positive for HIV, your result will also be shared with your state's health department for purposes of monitoring trends in the HIV epidemic. Also, remember that if you do test positive, it is very important for you to work closely with your doctor to get the care and treatment you need.

You can also get tested anonymously, where your name is not linked to your test results. However, anonymous testing sites are not available in all states and at all locations. Home HIV finger prick tests, which you can purchase in a drug store or online, are another way to test anonymously.

How much does an HIV test cost?

The cost of HIV testing varies. Community clinics that offer tests for free or on a sliding scale are available in most areas. Also, the cost of an HIV test may be covered by health insurance, if you have it. Call ahead to your doctor or local clinic to find out how they charge for HIV tests, or to your health insurance provider to see if the test is covered.

What if I test positive for HIV?

With the availability of treatments today, you can lead a long and healthy life as an HIV positive person. The most important thing to do if you test positive is to get connected with services and support as soon as possible. Advances in HIV/AIDS treatment are occurring all the time, and medical treatment and a healthy lifestyle can help you stay well much longer than in the early years of the epidemic. But, the longer you wait after testing positive to see a health care provider, the greater your chance of developing serious health problems.

If you've tested positive, here are some important steps to take to protect your health:

- See a doctor, even if you don't feel sick. If possible, see a doctor who has experience treating HIV. Consulting someone about your treatment options is the first step towards staying healthy.
- Find a support system. The emotional and physical challenges ahead can be difficult, and having people around to help is important. Ask your doctor about counselors and support groups that can help you.
- Talk with your partner(s). Tell your sexual partner(s) about your HIV status and make sure you reduce your risk of transmitting the virus by practicing safer sex, including using latex condoms or dental dams each and every time you have sex.

I tested negative—now what?

The most important thing to do if you test negative is to stay negative. Use condoms each and every time you have sex—vaginal—anal—oral no exceptions. If you use needles, don't share them. Get tested regularly, talk to your partners about HIV and don't be afraid to ask that they get tested with you. You want to make sure that they know you're watching out for their health and yours.