

HIV General Information

What is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks your immune system. Your immune system helps you fight off illness. If your immune system fails, you can become very sick. Once the virus gets inside your body, you may not look or feel sick for years, but you can still infect others. Over time, your immune system grows weak, and you can become sick with different illnesses. This is called Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

How does an individual get HIV?

An individual can get HIV by:

- having sex without a condom or oral dam with someone who has HIV and is not on treatment and virally suppressed.
- exposure to blood and body fluids contaminated with HIV.
- injection drug use (the virus can be spread by sharing or re-using needles and other injection equipment that are contaminated with HIV).
- receiving a transfusion of contaminated blood products (blood products have been tested for HIV since 1985).
- pregnancy, delivery, or breastfeeding/chestfeeding from someone who is living with HIV.

The virus is not spread by casual contact such as hugging, kissing, sneezing, coughing, sharing food/drink, or mosquito bites.

What are the symptoms?

Many people who have HIV feel healthy. The only way to know for sure if you are infected with HIV is to have a blood test. Your healthcare provider can give you a confidential test, or you can be tested anonymously at an anonymous testing clinic. Call Public Health for information about the anonymous testing clinic closest to you. Counselling will be offered before and after the test is done.

What is the treatment?

There is no cure for HIV infection. Treatment is available that can prevent or delay the progression of HIV to AIDS and prevent the virus from being transmitted to others.

Your health care provider can discuss available treatments with you and can refer you to an HIV clinic.

How can you prevent HIV infection?

- Practice safer injection and other harm reduction practices. Do not share needles, razors, toothbrushes, nail clippers, sexual toys, etc.
- Use a latex or polyurethane condom and/or oral dam every time you have sex, including oral and anal sex.
- HIV treatment can also prevent transmission. Someone who is living with HIV and on treatment and maintains a low viral load cannot sexually transmit HIV ('undetectable equals untransmissible, or U=U').
- Use of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medications by HIV-negative people before an exposure can reduce the risk of getting HIV in certain situations.
- Use of post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) medications by HIV-negative people can also reduce the risk of getting HIV if started within 72 hours after exposure.
- Wear gloves to clean up blood spills of an infected person. Use paper towels to clean up excess blood and put them in a sealed bag before throwing away. Clean surface with soap and water, then disinfect the area with a freshly prepared mixture of 1 teaspoon of 5.25% bleach and 2 cups of water. If another disinfectant is being used it is important to read and follow the manufacture's recommendations.
- If you are pregnant or think you might soon become pregnant, ask your healthcare provider or Public Health about being tested for HIV. Drug treatments are recommended to help reduce the chance of passing HIV to your baby.
- Use only professional tattoo artists and body-piercing artists who use proper cleaning, disinfecting and sterilizing processes.
- In certain circumstances, people with HIV are legally required to tell all their sexual partners that they are infected. For further information please see [HIV non-disclosure and the criminal law](#). They should also tell their healthcare providers, dentists and dental hygienists. People with HIV cannot donate blood, breast milk, organs, tissues or semen.