

# HIV Information Sheet

## What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is the virus that causes AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome). People with HIV have what is called HIV infection. If left untreated, HIV infection damages a person's immune system and can progress to AIDS. A diagnosis of AIDS is made by a physician using specific clinical or laboratory standards.

## What are the signs and symptoms of HIV infection?

Upon getting infected with HIV, many people have a flu-like illness with fever, aches and pains, and fatigue. This early flu-like illness usually goes away, but the person remains infected, probably for the rest of his/her life. During the next phase, lasting years, the virus appears silent: most infected people have no symptoms and feel healthy. However, the virus is actively reproducing, and these individuals are highly infectious to others.

Late in infection, after their immune system has been severely weakened by long-term HIV infection, untreated patients eventually develop full-blown AIDS. Symptoms of AIDS may include:

- Persistent fever
- Loss of appetite
- Significant weight loss
- Chronic fatigue
- Night sweats
- Diarrhea
- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Skin rashes
- Fungal infections of the mouth and throat

If untreated, patients with AIDS will die of their infection.

## How is HIV spread?

HIV is present in an infected person's body fluids such as blood, semen, and vaginal secretions. The virus is spread through:

- Unprotected sex
- Exposure to the blood of infected persons
- Sharing contaminated needles and syringes
- Needle stick injuries
- Maternal-child exposure during pregnancy, childbirth, or breast feeding
- Treatment with human clotting factor concentrates for bleeding problems
- Very rarely by blood transfusion or transplantation with organs or tissues

You may not have symptoms associated with this infection but the virus may be present in your blood and you can infect others.

**HIV is NOT spread by casual contact such as handshaking, hugging, dry kissing, or sitting next to an infected person. HIV is NOT spread by mosquitoes or other biting insects or by air.**

## What are the risk factors for HIV?

- Sexual contact, including oral and anal sex, without using a condom
- Sharing drugs, needles or syringes
- Vaginal delivery of an infant by an untreated, infected mother
- Breastfeeding by an untreated infected mother

## Can HIV infection be treated and prevented?

- There is currently no cure for HIV.
- Several medications are approved for the treatment of HIV infected individuals. These medications control viral spread in the body, greatly reducing the viral load and delaying the onset of AIDS.
- Because early treatment can improve the quality of life of HIV infected patients, **immediate medical evaluation, diagnosis, and treatment are critical.**
- There is no licensed vaccine to prevent HIV at this time.
- You can prevent spreading or acquiring HIV by avoiding the risk factors above: by using a latex condom during sexual intercourse, not sharing needles, and not breastfeeding your child if you are infected.

### **How is blood tested for HIV?**

All donated blood is tested for HIV before it is transfused to a patient. A sample of the donor's blood is tested using two screening tests. One detects antibodies to HIV; the other detects viral genetic material and is called a Nucleic Acid Amplification Test (NAT). All blood from donors who test repeatedly reactive (positive) on the antibody screening test or the NAT test is destroyed and is NOT used for transfusion. For the purposes of counseling, further confirmatory/supplemental tests may be performed. If the screening and confirmatory/supplemental tests are positive, a donor is considered infected with HIV and is permanently deferred from donating blood.

Blood donor screening tests are not designed to diagnose HIV in patients. People who wish to be tested for HIV should see their physician or visit a public health clinic. Free, anonymous HIV testing sites are widely available for diagnosing HIV infection.

### **What if I test confirmed positive for HIV?**

If you test **positive** on both a screening test and a confirmatory/supplemental test, you should consider yourself infected with HIV. It is critical that you make an appointment with your physician immediately. Your doctor will perform tests to diagnose whether you are truly infected with HIV, discuss the affect on your health, and prescribe treatment if necessary.

### **What is meant by a false-positive test result?**

A false-positive test result means that the initial screening test was reactive, but a more precise confirmatory/supplemental test was **negative**. Almost all false-positive test results occur because of interference with the test and are not due to infection. They are not testing errors. Receiving a false-positive test result can be worrisome and upsetting, but tests that are falsely positive really mean that infection is not present in the blood. Therefore, a person with a false-positive result does not have the disease and has not exposed a partner, children or friends to the infection or disease. If you have any additional concerns, you may speak to your physician who can give you medical advice. Repeat testing may also be discussed with your doctor.

### **What does an indeterminate test result mean?**

An indeterminate test result means that the test was run but didn't clearly provide a negative or positive result. An indeterminate test result means that HIV status cannot be resolved. The correct evaluation in such situations must be based on subsequent testing and clinical evaluation.

### **What should I do if I am infected with HIV?**

If you test **confirmed positive** for HIV, there are several important steps you should take to protect your health and the health of others:

- **DO see a doctor** for medical evaluation, even if you don't feel sick. Immediate and appropriate medical care is one of the ways to delay or prevent the onset of life-threatening conditions. Ask your doctor what vaccines you need and request a tuberculosis (TB) test because TB is one of the more common infections among HIV-infected persons.
- **DO** use condoms when you have sex and inform your sexual partner.
- **DO** tell anyone with whom you have had sex or shared needles or syringes since 1978 that you are (and they may be) infected with HIV.
- **DO** tell your obstetrician about your HIV infection before considering pregnancy.
- **DO** tell any doctor or dentist who treats you that you are infected with HIV.
- **DO NOT** donate blood, plasma, sperm/semen, body organs, or bone marrow.
- **DO NOT** share needles or syringes with anyone.
- **DO NOT** share things that can be contaminated with blood or body fluids like toothbrushes, shaving instruments, or nail files.

You may also consider joining a support group for people with HIV infection. Support groups can help people cope with being HIV infected. The following are some resources:

**The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Information Line 1-800-CDC-INFO, (1-800-232-4636), (English and Spanish)** provides free and confidential information.

The **Department of Health and Human Services' AIDS info at 1-800-448-0440 (English and Spanish) or 1-888-480-3739 (TTY)** provides information on specific treatments and clinical trials.

You can also find information about HIV on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hiv>

State and local health departments may also have programs and services that can assist you.