



HIV/AIDS



Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a retrovirus that weakens the immune system, the body's defence against disease. This can lead to development of unusual infections and cancers, which is called Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Medicines can delay progression of HIV infection to AIDS.

How is HIV spread?

A person with HIV infection has the virus in body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. HIV can spread if body fluids from an infected person enter the blood stream of another person.

HIV is most often spread by:

- Sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal) with an infected person without a condom
- Sharing needles, syringes, and other drug injecting equipment.

HIV can also be spread by:

- Mother to baby transfer during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding (uncommon in Australia and can be prevented with medical care)
- Contaminated blood products and medical equipment (in Australia blood products are screened for HIV and medical equipment is sterilised or disinfected before use)
- Non-sterile body piercing and tattooing.

Signs and symptoms

When first infected with HIV a person may develop flu-like symptoms such as:

- Extreme fatigue
- Low grade fever
- Headaches
- Skin rash.
- Swollen glands

These symptoms usually disappear after a few weeks and the person may have no specific symptoms for many years. However, it is common for people with HIV to have intermittent bouts of diarrhoea, swollen lymph glands, weight loss and night sweats. Some people do not know they have HIV until they develop serious infections late in their illness and are said to have AIDS. A person with HIV infection can transmit the virus to others, even if they have no symptoms.

Some of the symptoms associated with AIDS include:

- Loss of appetite
- Weight loss
- Extreme and constant tiredness
- Diarrhoea
- White spots or unusual marks in the mouth
- A dry cough
- Fevers, chills and night sweats.

HIV test

The only way to confirm HIV infection is a blood test. The blood test detects antibodies to the virus, but it can take up to three months for these antibodies to develop. This is called the window period. If you think you have been exposed to HIV, your doctor may recommend a test now, and again in 3-6 months. During this window period, always practice safe sex and do not donate blood.

Important

HIV is a fragile virus that does not survive for long outside the body. HIV cannot be spread by:

- Casual contact or touch
- Kissing or hugging
- Sweat, saliva or tears
- Coughing, sneezing or spitting

- Sharing eating and drinking utensils
- Giving blood at the blood bank
- Air conditioning
- Toilets or showers
- Swimming pools
- Drinking bubblers
- Mosquitoes or other biting insects.

If you think you have been exposed to HIV

If you think you have been exposed to HIV, contact a sexual health service, or HIV/AIDS clinic or information service about Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP). (In NSW phone the PEP helpline 1800 737 669). PEP involves treatment with medicines that may prevent HIV infection. PEP should be started as early as possible and certainly no later than 72 hours after exposure.

PEP medicines can have unpleasant side effects. PEP is not an alternative to safe sex.

Medicines

Medicines for HIV infection can improve quality of life and delay serious illness. The earlier a person is found to be HIV-positive, the earlier treatment can be started. Ask a doctor or pharmacist for advice.

Medicines include:

- Anti-retroviral medicines – slow down the spread of HIV through the body and can delay or prevent the onset of AIDS. Treatment involves taking combinations of several anti-retroviral medicines, to reduce the chances of the virus becoming resistant to treatment. To be effective, these medicines must be taken regularly and continuously
- Medicines to protect against infections and other illnesses associated with AIDS
- Medicines to treat infections and other illnesses associated with AIDS.

Safe sex

Safe sex is sex that protects against catching or passing on HIV. It includes:

- Limiting your sexual activity to the one, same partner
- Using condoms for all vaginal and anal sex. A fresh condom should be used each time, with plenty of water-based lubricant
- Oral sex, providing there are no cuts or sores in the mouth. Avoid semen in the mouth and /or use a condom or dental dam
- Kissing
- Mutual masturbation or massage
- Using dildos or vibrators (never share them without thoroughly cleaning them first).

Your **Self Care** Pharmacist

Self care

Protect yourself and others against infection.

- Practice safe sex.
- Do not share injecting equipment, and dispose of it safely.
- Do not share personal care items (e.g., razors, toothbrushes).
- For body piercing or tattoos, ensure your provider uses sterile equipment.
- Cover wounds with a waterproof dressing.
- Practice good hygiene. Wash hands well after contact with body fluids.
- If you are at risk of HIV infection do not donate blood, organs or sperm.
- If you travel, be aware that most countries have a much higher prevalence of HIV than Australia.
- If you are at risk of HIV infection, have an HIV test.

Related fact cards:

- *Genital herpes*
- *Safer Injecting Practices (website only – ask your pharmacist)*

For more information

Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services

– listed under A in the white pages of the phone book or website www.ahmrc.org.au

AIDS organisations listed under 'AIDS' in the white pages of the phone book

Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations – phone (02) 95579399 or website www.afao.org.au

Health/Insite – website www.healthinsite.gov.au

Multicultural HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C Service

– phone (02) 95155030 (freecall 1800 108 098 NSW country) or website www.multiculturalhivhepc.net.au

National Association of People living with AIDS, Australia

– phone 1800 259 666 or website www.napwa.org.au

Sexual health services – listed under 'S' in the white pages of the phone book

Sexual Health and Family Planning Australia – website www.shfpa.org.au

Consumer Medicine Information (CMI) leaflets – your pharmacist can advise on availability

NPS Medicines Line – phone 1300 888 763 Monday to Friday, 9am to 6pm EST

The Poisons Information Centre – in case of poisoning phone 13 11 26 from anywhere in Australia

Pharmacy Self Care Support – phone 1300 369 772 and ask for the Pharmacy Self Care Field Officer.

Pharmacists are medicines experts. Ask a pharmacist for advice when choosing a medicine.

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