

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) 101



What is HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV damages the body's immune system. This makes it difficult for the body to resist infection and some cancers.

HIV is a serious medical condition. Yet today, with medical care and medication, it is a manageable chronic health condition like other health conditions such as diabetes or heart disease.

People living with HIV usually take daily HIV antiretroviral medication and can lead a long and full life similar to anyone else. Evidence shows that people who start HIV antiretroviral medication immediately or soon after their diagnosis have better health outcomes than others who begin HIV treatment at a later stage.

Are HIV and AIDS the same thing?

No. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome or AIDS is a late stage of HIV infection. AIDS is diagnosed when the immune system of someone living with HIV has become so severely damaged it cannot resist opportunistic infections, including certain types of cancers, that normally do not affect people with healthy immune systems.

People living with HIV who take HIV antiretroviral medication as prescribed by their doctor, do not develop AIDS because the treatment prevents further damage to their immune system.

Symptoms of HIV?

Most people living with HIV have mild symptoms when they first contract HIV. Some people develop a flu-like illness with fever, swollen glands or a rash a few weeks after acquiring HIV. These symptoms usually disappear without treatment a week or two later. This is called a 'seroconversion illness.' After this initial illness, people who have acquired HIV usually have no symptoms for many years, even though the HIV virus is active in their body.

How is HIV transmitted

HIV is transmitted through the blood, semen, vaginal fluid or breast milk of a person living with HIV. It can be passed through vaginal or anal sex without the protection of a condom; by sharing drug injecting equipment such as syringes, needles, and other injecting equipment; by unsafe injections, tattoos, and other procedures that involve unsterile cutting or piercing; or to a baby during pregnancy, childbirth or breast-feeding (also known as mother-to-child-transmission or MTCT).

HIV is not transmitted in these ways

HIV is not transmitted by kissing or cuddling, day-to-day social contact such as shaking hands, sharing cutlery, cups or glasses, by eating food prepared by someone living with HIV, through toilet seats, or by mosquito or other insect bites. HIV cannot be transmitted sexually if the person living with HIV is on HIV antiretroviral medication as prescribed, and has an undetectable viral load (less than 200 copies per/mL in their blood) for six months or more.

How is HIV diagnosed?

HIV is diagnosed by a blood test. It normally takes between 15 and 24 days before a blood test can show a positive result after an exposure to HIV (the window period). Sometimes this can take longer.

Who is at risk of contracting HIV?

Testing for HIV is recommended at least once every year for all gay men, men who have sex with men, and people who inject drugs. If someone has multiple sexual partners or has anal sex without a condom, it is recommended that testing for HIV is carried out **every three months**.

Everyone who is sexually active should get tested for HIV. If they test positive for HIV, HIV antiretroviral medication should be started as soon as possible to ensure their health is maintained, which also significantly reduces the risk of passing on HIV.

What should I do if I think I'm at risk of HIV?

If you think you have been recently exposed to HIV within the last 72 hours or three days, you can take post exposure prophylaxis (PEP). PEP is a combination of HIV antiretroviral medications taken for one month that can prevent HIV infection if you have been exposed to HIV. It is important to start PEP as soon as possible after exposure, within 72 hours (three days). You can get PEP from any hospital Emergency Department.

Call the PEP Information Line on 1800 737 669.

If your exposure was more than three days ago, consult your doctor or a sexual health clinic about getting tested for HIV. You can also call Positive Life NSW for advice and support on (02) 9206 2177 or 1800 245 677 (freecall outside metro).

How is HIV transmission prevented?

HIV transmission can be prevented by

- A person living with HIV who is taking HIV antiretroviral medication as prescribed by their doctor, who has an undetectable viral load (less than 200 copies per/mL in their blood) for six months or more
- Using condoms when having sex
- Taking pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) prescribed by a doctor or PEP after exposure
- Using sterile injecting equipment every time (including needles or syringes)
- Avoiding sharing needles or other drug injecting equipment such as syringes, spoons and tourniquets.
- Avoiding getting tattooed or having a body piercing unless you are 100% sure that sterile equipment is being used.

What is PrEP?

PrEP is a HIV prevention medication for people who do not have HIV, but who are at high risk of contracting HIV.

For more information phone 02 8357 8386 or 1800 245 677 (freecall) or visit www.positivelife.org.au

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The voice of all people living with HIV

How is HIV treated?

Normally HIV is treated with daily HIV antiretroviral medication, which prevents further damage caused by HIV to a person's immune system. People living with HIV who take their HIV antiretroviral medication as prescribed by their doctor can lead long, full and healthy lives. There are health benefits for people who start HIV antiretroviral medication immediately after they are diagnosed with HIV.

HIV antiretroviral medication significantly reduces the amount of HIV virus in a person's blood and other bodily fluids which reduces the risk of onward transmission. People who have been able to reduce their HIV viral load to less than 200 copies per/mL (for six months or more), cannot pass HIV to their sexual partners, even without using a condom. However, HIV antiretroviral medication does not prevent the acquisition of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) other than HIV. Using condoms is still the best way to prevent transmission of STIs.

Does someone living with HIV have to tell another person before they have sex in NSW?

No. Under the Public Health Act 2010, a person living with HIV must take 'reasonable precautions' to prevent the transmission of HIV. Reasonable precautions include:

- Having an undetectable viral load of less than 200 copies/mL for at least six months
- Use of a condom
- Seeking and receiving confirmation from a sexual partner they are taking PrEP.

Further Information

General Public

NSW HIV Information Line 02 9332 9700 or 1800 451 600

NSW Sexual Health Infolink – Freecall 1800 451 624

PEP Information Line on 1800 737 669

Positive Life NSW contact@positivelife.org.au (02) 8357 8386 or Freecall 1800 245 677

Healthcare workers

Blood and Body Fluid Exposure 1800 804 823 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

[Blood and Body Fluid Exposure Immediate Response](#)

[Blood and Body Fluid Exposure Self Assessment](#)

[Blood and Body Fluid Exposure Procedure for the management of occupational blood and body fluid exposures](#)