

## HIV

Also known as human immunodeficiency virus, HIV/AIDS

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) attacks the immune system which makes it difficult for the body to fight infections. HIV can be passed on through the bodily fluids (such as blood, semen, vaginal fluid and anal fluid) of a person who has HIV with a detectable viral load, usually by having sex without a condom or sharing injecting equipment.

### QUICK FACTS

- HIV is found in blood, semen, vaginal fluids, anal mucus and breast milk
- HIV can be passed on during sex without a condom or when sharing injecting drug equipment
- Some people get flu-like symptoms such as a fever, sore throat, swollen glands and muscle aches and pains
- Very effective treatments are available to keep people living with HIV healthy
- There is no cure for HIV, but there is medication to prevent HIV infection for those at high risk (PrEP) and medication to prevent infection after a risk (PEP)

### What is this?

HIV is not the same as AIDS. If left untreated, HIV can lead to AIDS. However, with current, highly effective HIV treatments available, AIDS is now extremely uncommon in Australia.

### How do you get it?

You can become infected with HIV if you have sex without a condom or share injecting drug equipment with someone who has tested positive for HIV.

HIV **can be** passed on by:

- vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- sharing drug injecting equipment
- pregnancy, childbirth or breast feeding (if the mother has HIV)
- needle stick injuries (mainly healthcare workers)

HIV is **rarely** passed on by:

- vaginal or anal sex, if condoms have been used correctly
- oral sex without a condom

- skin splashes with HIV-infected body fluids

HIV has **never been reported** as being passed on by:

- kissing or cuddling
- shaking hands or social contact
- sharing knives and forks, cups or glasses
- toilet seats
- mosquitoes or other insects

## What are the symptoms?

Not everyone shows symptoms when they become infected with HIV. Many of the symptoms are similar to other illnesses, so it can be quite difficult to know that you have become HIV positive.

Symptoms can include:

- flu-like symptoms, such as runny or blocked nose, sore throat, cough, fever
- extreme and constant lethargy
- fevers, chills and night sweats
- decreased appetite and rapid weight loss
- swollen glands in the neck, underarm or groin
- persistent or dry cough
- diarrhoea

If you think you may have been exposed to HIV and you have one or more of the symptoms, see your doctor. These symptoms usually occur between one and three weeks after exposure to HIV.

## How do you test for it?

A blood test can tell if you have been infected with HIV.

This test - called a *HIV antibody test* - detects whether your body has produced any antibodies to fight the infection.

There is a short period of time between exposure to HIV and the ability for tests to detect HIV or its antibodies. This is called the window period and is generally six weeks after infection. In some cases, the window period can be between 2 and 12 weeks after infection.

## Test results

### Negative HIV test result

A negative HIV test result means that you have either:

- not been infected with HIV
- have been infected with HIV recently (within the last 6 weeks), but your body has not yet produced antibodies to fight the infection

In cases where your body has not yet produced antibodies, you are most likely in the window period and you can be tested

again in a few weeks' time.

### **Positive HIV test result**

A positive HIV test result means that HIV antibodies have been detected and you have been infected with HIV.

A positive result can make you feel stressed, shocked, angry, anxious and depressed. To help you manage your stress, all health services who provide HIV testing offer you counselling, before and after testing.

People can live well with HIV in Australia. We have access to very effective HIV treatments, which dramatically improve quality and length of life for people living with HIV. We also have many different support services available for people living with HIV.

### **Inconclusive HIV test result**

Occasionally, a result is neither positive nor negative. This is called an *inconclusive HIV test result*.

Everyone who receives an inconclusive test result is tested again. At your test result review appointment, your doctor or nurse will arrange for the repeat test.

For people with a recent high-risk exposure, the inconclusive test result often means they are in the window period of the infection. A repeat test in a few weeks' time will provide a negative or positive result.

For people with low HIV risk, the inconclusive test result is often a *false positive*. Factors such as pregnancy, blood transfusions, viral infections or autoimmune diseases can be a factor in inconclusive test results.

## How is it treated?

HIV treatments are medications which prevent the virus from multiplying (making copies of itself). This reduces the amount of virus in a person's body. The treatment is referred to as *antiretroviral treatment*.

Antiretroviral treatment has transformed HIV into a chronic, manageable condition, like diabetes or high blood pressure. The treatment supports people with the virus to live long and healthy lives.

Treatment can reduce the amount of virus in a person's body to such low levels that it is *undetectable*, which means the person cannot transmit HIV to others.

Beginning treatment as soon as possible after your HIV positive diagnosis makes the treatment more effective, protects your health and wellbeing, and helps you reach undetectable virus levels sooner.

Bear in mind:

- Under Australian and Victorian law, it is unlawful to discriminate against anyone who has HIV. Test results are strictly confidential.
- It is illegal for any information about a person being tested or a person with HIV to be disclosed to anyone without their explicit permission.
- In Victoria, the law states that a person must not knowingly or recklessly infect another person with an infectious disease, including HIV.-
- Life insurance and visas for some countries can be restricted for people living with HIV.

## Are there any complications if not treated?

If left untreated, HIV can *lead to* AIDS.

However, with current, highly effective HIV treatments available, AIDS is now extremely uncommon in Australia.

## Is it likely to come back after treatment?

There is no cure for HIV yet, but daily antiretroviral treatment effectively manages the virus.

## How can I protect myself?

There are many ways to protect yourself from HIV. You need to find the right prevention method - or combination of methods - which work for you and your sexual partners.

### **Condoms**

Using condoms is one of the easiest and best ways to prevent HIV infection.

Condoms are easily and widely available from pharmacies, supermarkets and sexual health or family planning clinics. They also have the added benefit of preventing other STIs.

### **PrEP**

PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a once-daily medication for people who do not have HIV, to reduce their risk of becoming infected with HIV.

Find out more about [PrEP](#) and where you can [get PrEP](#).

### **PEP**

PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis) is another way to use anti-HIV medication to prevent HIV. It is taken **after** a known or suspected exposure to HIV. PEP is taken for 28 days and must be started within 72 hours of exposure to HIV.

Find out more about [PEP](#) and where you can [get PEP](#).

### **Regular testing**

Regular testing for HIV and other STIs can help find infections earlier. This means you get the infections treated sooner and can prevent the infections from being transmitted to others.

Find out [where you can be tested](#).

### **Undetectable viral load**

If you have HIV, you can protect your partners by taking your antiretroviral treatment medication every day.

Treatment can reduce the amount of virus in a person's body to such low levels that it is *undetectable*, which means the person cannot transmit HIV to others.

## Where can I get help?

- Visit a [sexual health service near you](#)
- Visit your local doctor
- Visit your local community health centre

### DISCLAIMER

This fact sheet provides general sexual health information and is not intended to replace the need for a consultation with your doctor.

If you have concerns about your health, you should seek advice from your doctor.

If you require urgent care, you should go to your nearest Emergency Department or call [000](#).