

Know the Facts About HIV and AIDS



HIV (*human immunodeficiency virus*) is a virus that can lead to AIDS (*acquired immunodeficiency syndrome*). While there is no cure for HIV, early diagnosis and treatment are very effective at keeping people healthy. In addition, there are things you can do to prevent getting HIV. Read on to learn more about HIV and AIDS and how to keep you and your children healthy.

What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV is a virus that causes damage to the body's immune system. The immune system is the body's way of fighting infections. When the immune system does not work well, the body cannot fight off many serious illnesses.

The damage caused by HIV can occur over months, as sometimes happens when infants have HIV. In adults with HIV, the damage can occur more slowly. People with HIV are said to have AIDS when their immune systems are severely damaged or when HIV-related infections or cancers occur.

Because it can take years for symptoms to develop, many people do not know they have HIV. During this time, they can unknowingly spread the virus to others. Most people with HIV appear healthy. You cannot tell just by looking at people whether they have HIV. A blood test is the only way to be sure.

How is HIV spread?

HIV can be spread in the following ways:

- **By sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) with a person who has HIV.** Both males and females can spread HIV.
- **Through contact with an HIV-infected person's blood.** This can happen when sharing syringes or needles, accidentally getting stuck by a needle with a person's blood on it, or contact with other body fluids containing blood.
- **To a baby by a mother with HIV** during pregnancy, labor, delivery, breastfeeding, or sharing pre-chewed food.
- **Through blood or blood products from blood transfusions, organ transplants, or artificial insemination.** This is very rare because today donated blood, sperm, tissue, and organs are routinely screened and tested for HIV.

How is HIV *not* spread?

It is very important to know how HIV is *not* spread. You *cannot* get HIV by

- Shaking hands or hugging a person with HIV
- Sitting next to or playing with a person with HIV
- Eating food prepared by a person with HIV
- Sharing a glass, utensil, or plate with a person with HIV

Also, you *cannot* get HIV from

- The air
- Insect bites, including mosquito bites
- Giving blood
- Sharing bathrooms
- Swimming pools

What your children should know about HIV and AIDS

Teach your children the facts about HIV and AIDS, including how HIV is *not* spread (see previous section) and the following:

Young children will not be able to understand all of the information, but they should know

- To never touch anyone else's blood.
- To never touch needles or syringes. If they find one in the garbage or on the ground, they should tell an adult.

Older children and teens should know about

- **Abstinence.** The *best* way to protect themselves against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is to not have any type of sex (vaginal, anal, or oral). Let them know that many people wait to have sex.
- **Condoms.** The best way to lower the risk of getting HIV and other STIs, if they are sexually active, is to use a latex condom and limit the number of sexual partners they have.

Teens should also know about other types of birth control. However, make sure they know that other forms of birth control will *not* protect them from HIV or other STIs. If teens are sexually active, encourage them and their partners to be tested for HIV and STIs *before* sexual activity.

- **Drug use.** Drugs that are injected with needles are the riskiest because the needle or syringe can spread blood from one person to another. Using other drugs like alcohol, marijuana, or "club" drugs can also increase the risk of getting HIV. This is because drugs affect a person's judgment and can lead to risky behaviors, like having sex without a condom or with multiple partners.

Who should be tested for HIV?

Anyone involved in the risky behaviors listed previously *should* get an HIV test. Keep in mind, a negative test does not mean a person is safe if the risky behaviors took place only a few months before the test. This is because it can take several months for the HIV test to become positive.

The following symptoms may suggest a need for HIV testing:

- Persistent fevers
- Loss of appetite
- Frequent diarrhea
- Poor weight gain or rapid weight loss
- Swelling of the lymph nodes (glands) that does not go away
- Extreme tiredness or lethargy that does not go away with rest
- White spots in the mouth
- Recurring or unusual infections

How is HIV treated?

There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. However, there are medicines that can help delay symptoms, prevent the virus from spreading to an unborn baby, and help prevent additional infections in people with HIV. Because starting treatment for an HIV infection *early* (before there are symptoms of AIDS) is most effective at preventing symptoms and keeping people healthy, it is important to get tested to know if you have an HIV infection. If you do, you can stay healthy for many years if you start medicines as early as needed and stay on them.

Remember

HIV and AIDS are important issues to think and talk about. Knowing the facts about HIV and AIDS is the best way to keep you and your family healthy. If you need more information, talk with your child's doctor.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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