

AIDS

What is AIDS/HIV?

Acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and is one of the most deadly sexually transmitted diseases. HIV enters the body through blood, semen, or vaginal secretions, destroying white blood cells or lymphocytes (T cells) in the body's immune system—cells that help fight infection and disease.

The function of these cells is to protect the body from viruses, bacteria, and parasites. When the body detects any of these, it sends white blood cells to attack the infection, trying to keep the body healthy. When someone has HIV/AIDS, the immune system begins to break down, as HIV infects the T cells. As the virus grows in these cells, the white blood cells don't work as well, and eventually the immune system is destroyed. People with the HIV virus may show no symptoms for many years. They may not even be aware that they have the virus, and can unknowingly infect others. Treatment for AIDS, in the form of new medicines, has improved in recent years. However, there is still no cure for the disease.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that over one million Americans currently have the HIV virus. Years ago, certain groups were considered high-risk groups that were most likely to acquire and spread the disease. But today it is recognized that HIV, like other sexually transmitted diseases, is related to high-risk behavior, and that anyone engaging in those behaviors will have a greater chance of contracting HIV. These high-risk behaviors include sharing needles while using intravenous drugs and having unprotected sex with an infected partner.

How can you get HIV?

HIV is spread by an exchange of body fluids such as blood, vaginal fluids, and semen during sexual contact with someone infected with the virus. You can also get HIV by sharing needles and/or syringes (primarily for drug injection) with someone who is infected. HIV can be transmitted through a blood transfusion using blood from infected donors. But today this is uncommon because in most countries blood is screened for HIV antibodies.

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Babies can get HIV from their HIV-positive mothers who pass on the virus through fluids exchanged during pregnancy or childbirth. In some cases, babies can even get HIV by breast-feeding from HIV-positive mothers.

What are the risk factors for AIDS/HIV if you are using?

As a group, those of us in recovery have a higher HIV/AIDS risk because we may have had unprotected sex while drunk or high, or we may have been exposed to infected needles. If you relapse, be aware that users can get HIV/AIDS by using a “dirty” needle to inject drugs or by sharing “works” (such as a spoon or a cotton ball) that have been used by an infected person.

Some people think HIV is common only in certain high-risk groups such as drug users and in the gay community. But, in truth, anyone can get HIV/AIDS because it is spread when people act in high-risk ways. Your behavior, including maintaining your sobriety, will determine your risk for HIV infection.

How can you get tested for the HIV virus?

The only way to know if you have HIV is to take an HIV blood or saliva antibody test. (An antibody is a protein produced by the immune system as a response to a foreign agent in the body.) If your blood or saliva shows HIV antibodies, then you have the virus.

If you think you might have been exposed to HIV, you should be tested for the virus. Typically you will take an enzyme immunoassay (EIA) or the rapid HIV antibody test to see if your blood, oral fluid, or urine shows the HIV antibody. If you test positive, the results are confirmed using a second test such as the Western blot. A negative reading on the first test (the ELISA or EIA) means either that you are not infected or that not enough time has passed since the HIV virus entered your body to cause it to produce the HIV antibodies that the test looks for (six to twelve weeks is the usual time frame). The CDC recommends you get tested at least every six months, then continue to get tested for a year after you have stopped high-risk behaviors, because the virus may not show up on tests immediately after infection.

Don't let shame or anxiety keep you from getting tested for HIV. We may find it embarrassing to admit that we have had unprotected sex, shared needles, or acted in ways that put us at high risk for HIV infection. Rather than shaming ourselves for these actions, we should hang on to our self-esteem and realize

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that in the past, addiction impaired our judgment. We are not our disease, and our judgment can greatly improve now that we are sober. Our best approach is to take responsibility for our actions, make amends, learn from our mistakes, and move toward a healthy lifestyle.

Guidelines for lowering your HIV risk

- Stay clean and sober. Be aware that a relapse could put you in a position to engage in high-risk behaviors. Don't ever share needles, syringes, or other equipment ("works") used for injecting any type of drug, steroid, or vitamin, or for tattooing or body piercing. Many people have been infected with HIV, hepatitis, and other diseases this way. The virus from an infected person can stay in a needle and then be injected directly into the next person who uses the needle.
- Abstain from sexual intercourse or engage in a mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and does not have the HIV virus.
- If your sexual behaviors place you at risk for STDs, correct and consistent use of the male latex condom can reduce the risk of transmission. However, no protective method is 100 percent effective, and condom use cannot guarantee absolute protection against any STD. The more sex partners you have, the greater your chances of getting HIV or other diseases passed through sex.
- Don't share razors or toothbrushes because of the possibility of contact with blood.

Living with AIDS/HIV

HIV especially affects recovering people as a group. Even if you are not HIV positive, you probably know someone in recovery who is. Perhaps friends of yours have died of AIDS. Dealing with the reality of living with HIV or AIDS can be extremely challenging, but regular medical care and proper medications can help HIV patients extend their lives. With advances in new medicine, HIV can be managed as a long-term chronic disease, often for decades.

Fortunately, the medical community has made significant progress in treatment of AIDS, and patients are living longer with less difficulty than ever before. If you are HIV positive, you can immediately take a number of important

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steps to protect your health. First, see a doctor, even if you do not feel sick. Try to find a doctor who has experience in treating HIV. Have a TB (tuberculosis) test done. You may be infected with TB and not know it. Undetected TB can cause serious illness, but it can be successfully treated if caught early. Staying sober is one of the best things you can do for your health. Alcohol, illegal drugs, and nicotine can weaken your immune system. Have a screening test for sexually transmitted diseases. Undetected STDs can cause serious health problems. It is also important to practice safe-sex behaviors so you can avoid getting STDs.

While HIV is not a death sentence, many people who are HIV positive suffer from the anxiety and fear that they may develop severe, debilitating symptoms. If you are HIV positive, you may worry about rejection by family and friends, and those fears may lead to isolation and despair. How can you cope with these feelings? You might want to find others in your Twelve Step support group who are also HIV positive and want to share their experiences, successes, and fears.

If you are HIV positive, your task is to live as healthily and happily as possible while being treated, and to remain optimistic that medical science may soon offer you better treatment. Many recovering people living with HIV find that the spirituality they have learned through Twelve Step programs helps them live to their fullest potential—physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Especially if you have a stressful health issue like HIV, working the Twelve Steps can help you get past emotional barriers that could restrict your ability to live fully. To be able to move past HIV, it will be helpful to revisit the Twelve Step concepts of powerlessness (Step One) and realize that a Higher Power (Step Two) can help restore us.

Where can you get help for AIDS/HIV?

To find out where to go in your area for HIV counseling and testing, contact your local health department or the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National AIDS Hotline. For more information about HIV/AIDS education and prevention contact the American Red Cross.