

PATIENT EDUCATION ON HIV AND AIDS

HIV = Human Immunodeficiency Virus

AIDS = Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

What is HIV?

HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is the virus that causes AIDS. People with HIV have what is called a HIV infection. HIV infections are treatable but not currently curable. Many people have lived for many years with HIV.

Receiving a positive HIV test result means that you have been infected with the virus. Being infected with HIV does not mean that you have AIDS. Many people with HIV have no symptoms and don't know they are infected. AIDS is a disease you get when HIV destroys your body's immune system. Normally, your immune system helps you fight off illness. When your immune system fails you can become very sick and can even die. Without treatment, the body's immune system becomes so weak, that it cannot fight infections or certain types of cancer.

HIV disease becomes AIDS when your CD4⁺ T cell count drops below 200 cells/mm³, and/or you develop an illness seen with AIDS. Illnesses associated with AIDS include infections (tuberculosis, fungal infections, herpes) or cancers (cervical, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Kaposi's sarcoma).

How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread through close contact with the body fluids of a HIV infected person through sex, sharing of needles, and receiving infected blood. It can also be passed from mother to baby.

Body fluids that can transmit HIV include:

- Blood or any body fluid containing blood
- Semen
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk

Health care workers may come into contact with the virus through other body fluids, such as:

- fluid surrounding the brain and the spinal cord
- fluid surrounding bone joints
- fluid surrounding a fetus

What makes you more likely to be infected with HIV?

- Sharing infected drug needles or syringes
- Having sex without condoms with someone who has HIV
- Having another sexually transmitted disease (such as Chlamydia, gonorrhea or other infections)
- Having received blood products between 1978-1985
- Having sex with someone with any of the above risk factors

How to prevent HIV infection?

- Avoid the risk factors listed above
- If you have sex, use condoms. This will decrease your risk of a HIV infection
- The spermicide, nonoxynol-9, although associated with protection from pregnancy, is also associated with an increase in HIV infection

Mother to child HIV transmission

If you are HIV infected, you have about a 1 in 4 chance of giving HIV to your baby without any treatment. With early treatment during pregnancy, this risk falls to less than a 1 to 2 in 100. It is very important that all pregnant women have a HIV blood test so that they can minimize the chance of passing on HIV infection if they carry it.

What is HIV treatment?

Many drugs are used to keep a HIV positive person healthy. For most people who start HIV drug (antiretroviral) therapy, their viral load drops to an undetectable level (below 50 copies/mL) within 16-20 weeks. However, HIV drug treatment is complicated and different people have different results. HIV treatment can help people at all stages of HIV disease stay healthy.

What are the benefits of taking a HIV test?

A simple blood test can show if you are infected with HIV. The first blood test is an antibody test (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) and, if this is positive, a second test is repeated on the same blood sample. If the sample is repeatedly the same result, the results are confirmed using another more specific test such as the Western blot.

You can ask your health care provider about this test. Free anonymous testing is also available at your local public health department.

What are the benefits of knowing your HIV status early?

- You will be able to receive earlier treatment for your health. This can prolong your life for many years if you are infected and don't know it.
- If you are pregnant, earlier treatment during pregnancy is more likely to prevent transmission to your baby.
- You can take measures to prevent HIV transmission to others.

Where can you get more information about HIV?

Ask your doctor/health care provider or local public health department.

Remember

- No one is immune to HIV
- Young women are the fastest growing group of people in the U.S. with AIDS
- Protect yourself from HIV. Use condoms. Avoid illegal intravenous drugs.

Websites

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/index.htm>

For Patients

<http://aidsinfo.nih.gov/guidelines/adult/brochure/index.html>

<http://www.hivtest.org/index.htm>

<http://www.ashastd.org/stdfaqs/index.html>

For Health Care Providers

http://aidsinfo.nih.gov/guidelines/default_db2.asp?id=50