

# BASIC FACTS ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

## WHAT ARE HIV AND AIDS?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus that weakens the body's defense (immune) system until it can no longer fight off illnesses such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, cancerous tumors and others. HIV kills your CD4 cells (T cells), which direct your body's immune system to defend against infection.

You are considered to have AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) when your immune system is seriously damaged by HIV. In the U.S., an HIV-infected person receives a diagnosis of AIDS when his/her CD4 count is less than 200 or if diagnosed with a specific illness. (An average CD4 cell count in a healthy person is 1,150.)

## IS THERE A CURE FOR HIV OR AIDS?

There is still no cure or vaccine for HIV or AIDS. However, there are new drug treatments that can help many people with HIV stay healthy longer and can delay the onset of AIDS. As a result of these drugs, the number of HIV cases that develop into AIDS and the number of AIDS-related deaths have dropped dramatically in the U.S.. However, HIV infection rates remain unchanged. [pg.23]

## HOW MIGHT I BECOME INFECTED WITH HIV?

HIV is transmitted from an HIV-positive person through infected body fluids, such as semen, pre-ejaculate fluid, blood, vaginal secretions or breast milk. HIV can also be transmitted through needles contaminated with HIV-infected blood, including needles used for injecting drugs, tattooing or body piercing. HIV is most often transmitted sexually. [pg. 23]

## CAN I GET HIV FROM CASUAL CONTACT WITH AN INFECTED PERSON?

No. You do not get HIV from an HIV-infected person by working together, playing sports, shaking hands, hugging, closed-mouth kissing, sharing drinking glasses, eating utensils or towels, using the same wash water or toilet, swimming in the same pool, or coming in contact with their sneezes, coughs, tears or sweat. You also don't get HIV from bug bites or by donating blood. [pg. 23]

## HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF FROM HIV?

You are safest if you do not have sexual intercourse, oral sex or share needles or injection equipment. You are also safe if you are in a relationship in which both you and your partner are monogamous and have been free of HIV for 6 months. Whenever you are unsure about the risk of infection, always use a latex barrier when having sex of any kind—vaginal, oral or anal

## WHAT IS UNSAFE SEX?

Unsafe sex—vaginal, oral or anal—is sex without the use of a condom or other protective latex barrier unless you are certain both partners have remained free of HIV for 6 months. [pg. 23]

## WHAT IS SAFER SEX?

Safer sex is sexual activity without penetration or sex using protection, such as a latex condom or, in the case of oral sex, a latex barrier or plastic wrap. Other safer behaviors include intimate activities such as caressing, hugging, kissing, massaging, etc. [pg. 23]

## WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF HIV?

HIV affects each person differently. Because many people with HIV can look and feel healthy for years, you cannot rely on symptoms to know whether you are infected. The only way to know is to be tested.

## IS HIV MORE PREVALENT AMONG CERTAIN POPULATIONS IN THE U.S.?

Research shows that, because of high-risk behaviors, HIV is prevalent among men who have sex with men, injection drug users, communities of color, and youth. Since the beginning of the epidemic, AIDS cases among blacks, Hispanics, and women have increased significantly. [pg. 8]

## HOW CAN I GET HIV FROM INJECTING DRUGS?

HIV can be transmitted through shared needles or equipment contaminated with HIV-infected blood. Anyone who injects drugs must either sterilize all equipment or use new, disposable needles and dispose of them carefully. [pg. 9]

## WHAT IF I THINK I MIGHT HAVE HIV?

If you think you may have been infected with HIV, you should go to a doctor or HIV/AIDS clinic for counseling and testing. Also, many organizations offer mobile testing for HIV. [pg. 25-26]

## CAN I KEEP MY HIV STATUS PRIVATE?

Confidential testing (by name) is available in all states. Anonymous testing (no name) is available in many. Home test kits are available. [pg. 25-26]

## WHY SHOULD I BE TESTED?

Knowing if you are HIV-positive will allow you to seek early treatment that could help you stay healthy longer. Whether you are HIV-negative or HIV-positive, you can learn how to prevent future infection with HIV or other STDs through the counseling at many testing centers. [pg. 25-26]

# PREVENTING HIV INFECTION

For people who are not infected with HIV, prevention efforts focus on keeping them from becoming infected.

For the HIV-positive, prevention seeks to keep them from developing opportunistic infections, to prevent their infection from progressing to AIDS, and to keep them from spreading HIV to others.

## HOW TO PREVENT HIV INFECTION

- Abstinence is the safest way to be sure you will not be infected with HIV or any other sexually-transmitted disease (STD).
- Living in a committed, monogamous relationship with a person who is free from HIV or any other STD is safe, if you have a mutual agreement to refrain from any high risk behaviors.
- Don't have sex with anyone whose health status you do not know.
- If you have sex, use a new latex condom or other latex barrier *every time*.
- With condoms, use a water-based lubricant. Do not use baby oil or other oil-based lubricants. These may cause the condom to be ineffective.
- Don't share sex toys.
- Don't share needles or other drug supplies.

## FOR THE HIV-POSITIVE

- Observe all precautions above to protect yourself and anyone with whom you are intimate.
- Reveal your HIV-positive status to anyone you have had sex with or are currently intimate with.
- To avoid reinfection with HIV and other infections, always use a condom when having sex, even if you *and* your partner are HIV-positive.
- Don't donate blood, plasma or organs.
- Don't share toothbrushes, needles or razors.

## FOR MEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH MEN

- Use a new latex condom during oral or anal sex (Use only water-based lubricants).
- Unprotected anal sex is a very high risk behavior, especially if you and your partner do not have a mutual agreement to refrain from higher risk behaviors outside the relationship.
- Face personal issues of self esteem that may make you less motivated to practice safer sex.

## FOR WOMEN WHO HAVE SEX WITH WOMEN

- Female-to-female sexual contact is a possible way to become infected with HIV.
- Oral or vaginal exposure to vaginal secretions, menstrual blood and breast milk is potentially infectious.
- Use a dental dam or other barrier for oral sex.

## FOR PREGNANT HIV-POSITIVE WOMEN

Pregnant women can significantly reduce the chance of passing the HIV virus to their child by taking AIDS drugs during pregnancy and labor.

- Because HIV can be transmitted through breast milk, don't breast-feed your baby if you are HIV positive.

## FOR HETEROSEXUALS

- Use a new latex condom for each act of vaginal or anal sex. (Use only water-based lubricants). For oral sex use a new condom or other protective barrier.
- The female condom provides effective protection against HIV and STDs. It can give a woman greater control over protecting herself without relying on a male's willingness to use a condom.
- Women who have sex with men must rely on their knowledge about condom use and their ability to convince partners to use condoms.
- Recent studies have warned women at risk for HIV not to use products containing the microbicide nonoxynol-9 (found in most contraceptive creams, gels, suppositories, foams, films and sponges). The chemical may increase the risk for acquiring the HIV virus.
- Be aware of cultural and social norms that affect sexual negotiations.

## FOR INJECTION DRUG USERS

- Seek treatment as soon as possible for your substance abuse.
- Always use sterile injection equipment.
- Never share needles, syringes, and other injection equipment.
- Using syringes cleaned with bleach is effective but not as safe as using new sterile syringes.
- Be sure all equipment and supplies used (cotton, water, needles) are not contaminated.