

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is a virus that attacks and weakens the immune system. The immune system is the body's defense against infections.

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

If you are infected with HIV, you are said to be "HIV-positive." Over time as HIV weakens your immune system, you are more likely to get other infections. The late stage of HIV infection is known as acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

HIV is NOT spread by:

- Tears
- Sweat
- Feces
- Urine

How is it spread?

Each year in the United States about 40,000 people get infected with HIV. The HIV virus is found only in certain body fluids:

- ◆ Blood.
- ◆ Vaginal fluid.
- ◆ Semen.
- ◆ Breast milk.

Contact with infected body fluids can spread HIV.

HIV is mostly spread by:

- ◆ Sexual contact:
 - Vaginal and anal sex.
 - Sharing unclean sex toys.
 - Oral sex, very rarely.
 - Body fluids with HIV can enter tiny breaks or rips in the linings of the vagina, vulva, rectum, or mouth. Rips and tears in these areas can be common and often unnoticed.
- ◆ Needle sharing:
 - Used or unclean needles.
 - During illegal drug use.
- ◆ Breastfeeding:
 - HIV can be spread to babies and others who drink breast milk from a woman who is HIV positive.
- ◆ Pregnancy and birth:
 - HIV-positive women can spread the virus to their babies during pregnancy and birth.

HIV is rarely spread from a blood transfusion because:

- ◆ All donated blood is tested and screened for HIV.
- ◆ Blood and blood products that test positive for HIV are safely destroyed. None are used for transfusions.
- ◆ There is no risk of getting HIV when donating or giving blood.

VA offers HIV testing and treatment to all enrolled Veterans.

You can't tell if a person is HIV infected by looking at them.

What are signs of HIV?

Most people with HIV will not show signs of HIV until years after infection. People who have been recently infected with HIV may have:

- ◆ Fever.
- ◆ Chills.
- ◆ Night sweats.
- ◆ Headache.
- ◆ Sore throat.
- ◆ Swollen lymph nodes, usually on the neck.
- ◆ Tiredness.
- ◆ Rash.
- ◆ Sores or infections in the mouth.
- ◆ Body aches.

How do you know if you have HIV?

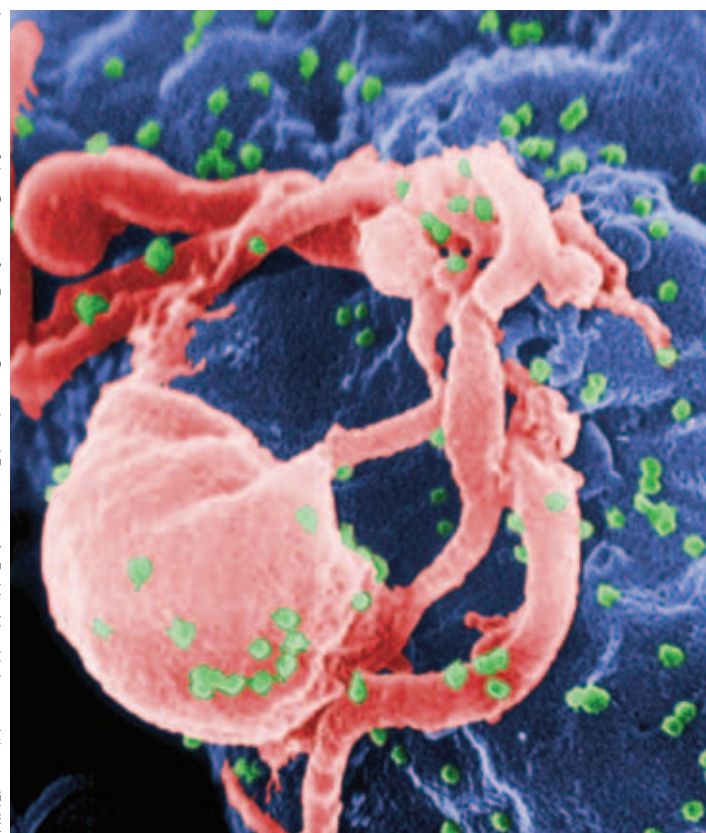
The only way to know you have HIV is by getting an HIV test. Routine HIV testing is recommended for all adults. HIV tests are offered by health care providers in doctor's offices, hospitals, local public health departments, and in community clinics. Most HIV tests use either blood or saliva. HIV tests are very accurate but may not show HIV from a recent infection. It is important to always discuss your test result and retesting with your test provider.

How is it treated?

There is no cure for HIV. But there are very effective treatments that help your body fight HIV. Your health care provider can help you decide when to start treatment and which medicines to take. Treatment is lifelong and can:

- ◆ Reduce the amount of virus in your body.
- ◆ Reduce the spread of HIV to others.
- ◆ Help most people with HIV live longer and healthier lives.

The sooner you know if you have HIV, the sooner your provider can know if you need treatment.



Picture of microscopic HIV virus particles (small, round, green objects) growing from an infected immune cell (large red object).

What can happen if you have HIV for a long time?

If HIV infection is not diagnosed and treated, it can progress into AIDS. AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. AIDS is the late stage of HIV infection. When you have AIDS, the virus has severely weakened your immune system. If HIV is not treated, other life-threatening infections can occur. The only way to know if you have AIDS is through a medical exam and testing by your health care provider. Common signs of AIDS are:

- ◆ Rapid weight loss.
- ◆ Fevers.
- ◆ Night sweats.
- ◆ Extreme tiredness.
- ◆ Swelling of the lymph nodes in the armpits, groin, or neck which doesn't go away.
- ◆ Diarrhea that lasts for more than a week.
- ◆ Sores of the mouth, anus, or genitals.
- ◆ Infections such as pneumonia, tuberculosis, and certain cancers.
- ◆ Red, brown, pink, or purplish blotches on or under the skin or inside the mouth, nose, or eyelids.
- ◆ Depression.
- ◆ Memory loss and other brain or nerve problems.

If you have HIV:

- ◆ See a health care provider regularly.
- ◆ If on treatment, be sure to take medicines as prescribed.
- ◆ Tell current and recent sex partners that you have HIV.
- ◆ Avoid spreading HIV to others by:
 - Using condoms during all sexual contact.
 - Not sharing used or unclean needles and sex toys.
 - Not breastfeeding.

Image courtesy of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Public Health Image Library (PHIL)

How can you avoid HIV?

The best ways to avoid HIV are:

- ◆ Avoiding sexual contact.
- ◆ Using condoms during all sexual contact.
- ◆ Not using or injecting illegal drugs. If you do use injection drugs, use a new sterile needle and clean drug equipment each time you prepare and inject drugs.



Other ways to reduce the risk of getting HIV include:

- ◆ Reducing the number of sex partners.

- ◆ Have sex with only one partner who does not have sex with others and does not have HIV.
- ◆ Knowing that douching or washing the vagina or anus after sex will not prevent HIV.
- ◆ Knowing that other forms of birth control do not protect against HIV.
- ◆ Not reusing or sharing needles, or drug equipment (works). If unused (new) needles and sterile drug equipment are not used, then all of it should be boiled in water or disinfected with a bleach solution, then rinsed with water before each use.

Ask your sex partners to test for HIV and other STDs.



What about pregnancy?

A woman who has HIV can pass the virus to her baby during:


- ◆ Pregnancy.
- ◆ Birth.
- ◆ Breastfeeding.

A woman with HIV who is not treated for HIV during pregnancy or labor has a **25%** chance (1 in 4) of giving the virus to her baby. If the mother is treated, the chance of passing the virus to the baby is less than 2% (fewer than 2 out of 100 times). Babies born to HIV-positive mothers should be treated with anti-HIV drugs after birth.

If you are pregnant or want to get pregnant, you should:

- ◆ Get tested for HIV.
- ◆ Have your sexual partner tested.
- ◆ Discuss your HIV status with your health care provider.
- ◆ Talk to your health care provider about starting HIV treatment if you are HIV-positive.
- ◆ Take steps to avoid HIV by:
 - Having safe sex. Each time you have sex use a condom.
 - Not injecting illegal drugs.
- ◆ Not breastfeeding your infant if you have HIV.

If you are pregnant and HIV-positive, you should talk to your health care provider about starting treatment with anti-HIV drugs to prevent passing HIV to your baby.



For more on HIV/AIDS see:

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA):

VA National HIV/AIDS Website; for Veterans and the Public
www.hiv.va.gov/patient/

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS):

HIV/AIDS Basics
www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

HIV/AIDS Basics
www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/qa/definitions.htm

Pregnancy and Childbirth; What Women Can Do
www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/perinatal/protection.htm

Oral Sex and HIV Risk
www.cdc.gov/hiv/resources/factsheets/pdf/oralsex.pdf

National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID/NIH):

What are HIV and AIDS?
www.niaid.nih.gov/topics/HIVAIDS/Understanding/Pages/whatAreHIVAIDS.aspx