

# What You Need to Know HIV/AIDS 101

## What is HIV/AIDS?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. Specifically, the virus destroys a certain type of immune cells known as CD4+ T cells.

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) develops when the body's levels of CD4+ T cells get too low. Very low levels of these cells result in an increased risk for many infections as well as certain types of cancers.

When HIV is detected early and managed with the appropriate medications, it is unlikely for the infection to progress to AIDS. Routine HIV testing is therefore essential, especially if you are at increased risk of infection.

## What are the symptoms of HIV?

Upon initially contracting HIV, it can feel like the flu. During the first few days to weeks, you may experience symptoms such as: fevers, chills, muscle aches, fatigue, night sweats, sore throat, swollen lymph nodes, or rash. These symptoms are not specific to infection with HIV. Some people who become infected with HIV initially have no symptoms at all.

It's important to get tested immediately if you think there's a possibility you may have been exposed to HIV, as medications that may prevent infection must be started as soon as possible. The first 2 to 4 weeks after infection—known as the acute infection stage—is also the time people are most likely to spread the virus.

## How can you catch HIV?

HIV is most commonly transmitted through unprotected vaginal or anal sex, by sharing needles or other drug injection equipment such as syringes, or through accidents involving exposure to blood. HIV cannot be transmitted through the air, water, or by casual contact.

It is possible for babies to be infected with HIV during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding.

## Is HIV treatable/curable?

HIV and AIDS are not considered curable. However, HIV is treatable through certain medications, known as antiretroviral therapy (ART).

When properly managed with ART, the level of HIV can become so low that the virus is undetectable—at which point HIV effectively cannot be transmitted to others.

Early management with ART also makes progressing to AIDS very unlikely.

## Preventing HIV transmission

Pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is a medication prescribed by your doctor and is an excellent way for people with risk factors for contracting the virus to remain HIV-free. The only FDA-approved PrEP medication is emtricitabine/tenofovir disoproxil fumarate, sold under the trade name Truvada.

Starting on PrEP requires that you be HIV-free. Regular follow-up appointments with your doctor are necessary to make sure you haven't contracted the virus.

When an uninfected individual uses PrEP every day, HIV transmission rates from sex can be reduced by more than 90%. The risk is even lower when PrEP is used in addition to condoms or other barrier devices.

For people who use injection drugs, PrEP reduces the risk of contracting HIV by more than 70%.

People with known or suspected exposure to HIV who are not on PrEP should immediately seek medical care to begin post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). To prevent infection with HIV, PEP must be started within 72 hours of exposure—ideally as soon as possible. PEP should not be used as a substitute for other HIV prevention methods such as the use of condoms, PrEP, and/or sterile needles.

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