



Fact Sheet 1:

HIV AND AIDS: BASIC INFORMATION

What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. It is the virus that causes people to develop AIDS. HIV damages the body's immune system, making that person vulnerable to certain infections. Having HIV does not mean that you have AIDS. It may take several years for HIV to damage the immune system so much that a person becomes unwell. During that time a person with HIV can be well and live with the virus for many years without developing AIDS.

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is a collection of rare infections and cancers that people with HIV can develop. If a person with HIV gets one of these specific illnesses, they are said to have AIDS. Many of the organisms that cause these illnesses are quite common and relatively harmless to a person with a healthy immune system. However, in someone whose immune system is badly damaged, they can cause severe illness and death.

How does a person become infected with HIV?

The four main ways HIV can be passed on are:

- Having vaginal or anal sex without a condom with someone who has HIV
- Through sharing of drug-injecting equipment that is contaminated with infected blood
- From a woman with HIV to her baby during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding.
- By injection or transfusion of blood from an infected person

You **cannot** get HIV through daily social contact such as:

- Social kissing, touching, hugging, shaking hands
- Sharing a swimming pool, toilet facilities, crockery, cutlery, or eating food prepared by someone with HIV
- Coughing, sneezing or tears, insect or animal bites.

What about sex?

You can be infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections if you have vaginal or anal sex without a condom with someone who has an infection. If you are having sex, using a condom provides an effective barrier against HIV. Condoms also protect against other sexually transmitted infections as well as unintended pregnancies.

What about drugs?

You can be infected with HIV and other blood borne viruses such as Hepatitis C if you inject drugs and share needles and syringes with others. If you are injecting drugs, use a new needle and syringe each time and do not share any injecting equipment.

What about having a baby?

If you are pregnant and have HIV, appropriate care before, during and after birth can reduce the risks of HIV transmission to your baby from 20 per cent to as little as one per cent. To reduce the rate of HIV transmission you can:

- Have treatment with the anti-HIV drugs during pregnancy
- Have an elective Caesarean birth
- Choose to bottle-feed your baby if possible as there is an estimated 10 per cent risk that HIV can be passed on through breastfeeding.

What about giving and receiving blood?

Donating blood in the UK is safe. All equipment is sterile and used once. All blood products, organs and tissue for transplant are screened for HIV antibodies. Blood products are also heat-treated to destroy HIV. As a result, the current risk of becoming infected with HIV from a blood transfusion in the UK is negligible.

What is an HIV test?

HIV is usually diagnosed by a blood test, known as an HIV antibody test or an HIV test. This test looks for antibodies formed by the immune system if HIV is present. When a person becomes infected with HIV it can take up to three months for the immune system to produce enough antibodies to show up in a test. This time is called the window period or seroconversion.

If antibodies are found, the test result is referred to as positive. This means that a person is HIV-positive. If antibodies are not found, the test result is referred to as negative. This means that a person is HIV-negative, as long as the test was done after the end of the three-month window period. If you are thinking about having a HIV test, you can contact the Sexual Health Information Line (0800 567 123) who will tell you what is involved and where the best place is to go for a test.

Can HIV be treated?

Anti-HIV therapy is treatment with drugs that attack HIV itself. These drugs interfere with the way the virus tries to reproduce itself inside a human cell, but they cannot kill the virus completely.

Anti-HIV drugs are usually prescribed in combinations of three or more. This is called combination therapy or Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART). Since its introduction in 1996, HAART has been proved effective in controlling HIV and delaying the onset of AIDS for many people, but not everyone.

Treatments have helped many people but they do have side effects, which can sometimes be severe. This can make treatments difficult to take, and there can be complex treatment regimes which people have to follow. These difficulties in taking tablets mean that treatments can fail. Also the longer these treatments are taken for the more likely they are to fail.

Treatments fail when HIV becomes resistant to the medication being taken. When one combination has failed another combination of drugs has to be taken, but the more times treatments fail the harder it is to get a combination that works.

Are there medicines to prevent HIV infection?

At present there is no vaccine to prevent HIV infection and there is still no cure for AIDS. Experimental vaccines are being researched but there is no indication of there being an effective vaccine available in the near future.

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Published by:

National AIDS Trust (NAT)
New City Cloisters
196 Old Street
London EC1V 9FR

Tel + 44 (0)20 7814 6767
Fax + 44 (0)20 7216 0111
Email info@nat.org.uk
Web www.nat.org.uk

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