

# ▶ **FACTS** ABOUT HIV

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) was first discovered in 1987. Scientists identified it as the cause of AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) – a disease which had been killing people by the thousands across the world.

HIV and AIDS are not the same thing. When someone has HIV, this means the virus is living in their body. A person is considered to have developed AIDS when their immune system is so weak it can no longer fight off a range of diseases with which it would normally cope.

When a person first gets HIV, their symptoms might resemble those of a heavy cold or flu. They commonly involve multiple symptoms that all occur at the same time. They last about a week and then resolve.

The symptoms of HIV can differ from person-to-person and some people may not get any symptoms at all for many years.

Without treatment, the virus will get worse over time and damage the immune system. A person living with HIV at a late stage of infection is more likely to get serious infections that they would otherwise be able to fight off. If a person develops certain serious infections, they are said to have AIDS.

## **SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:**

- ▶ **WEIGHT LOSS**
- ▶ **CHRONIC DIARRHOEA**
- ▶ **NIGHT SWEATS**
- ▶ **A FEVER**
- ▶ **A PERSISTENT COUGH**
- ▶ **MOUTH AND SKIN PROBLEMS**
- ▶ **REGULAR INFECTIONS**
- ▶ **SERIOUS ILLNESSES OR DISEASES**

## **HOW HIV IS PASSED ON** ▶▶

**HIV IS AN INFECTIOUS DISEASE WHICH MEANS IT CAN BE PASSED ON FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER.**

HIV CAN BE PASSED ON THROUGH **SOME BODILY FLUIDS** SUCH AS SEMEN, VAGINAL FLUIDS, BLOOD, AND BREAST MILK.

THE MOST COMMON WAY HIV IS TRANSMITTED IS THROUGH SEX WITHOUT A CONDOM. IT CAN BE PASSED ON THROUGH DIRECT SHARING OF INFECTED NEEDLES OR OTHER INJECTING DRUG EQUIPMENT. A SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV IN THE UK ACQUIRED IT BEFORE OR SOON AFTER BIRTH ('VERTICAL' TRANSMISSION).

HIV **CANNOT** BE PASSED ON THROUGH DAY-TO-DAY CONTACT, OR KISSING, SPITTING OR SHARING A CUP OR PLATE.



## CLEAN NEEDLES

People who inject drugs should always use clean needles to avoid acquiring HIV from others.

## CONDOMS

When used correctly, condoms worn on the penis or condoms worn in the vagina or anus are effective against HIV transmission when having vaginal or anal sex. Condoms can also protect against other STIs and pregnancy.

Free condoms are available at sexual health clinics. Condoms can also be purchased online or in pharmacies and supermarkets.

## TESTING

Getting tested regularly for HIV if you are sexually active means that you can be sure of your HIV status.

If you know you are HIV positive you can access treatment to prevent you passing HIV on to others and to stop you from getting sick. If you are HIV negative then you can continue to take steps to protect your sexual health.

Tests are free and confidential at sexual health clinics. Self-testing kits can be ordered online for those who would rather test at home.

# HOW TO PREVENT HIV

## PREP AND PEP

PrEP and PEP are pills that you can take to avoid getting HIV. PrEP is taken before having sex, and it stops transmission of HIV even if having sex without condoms. However, unlike condoms, PrEP does not protect against other STIs or pregnancy.

PEP is taken if you've had sex without a condom and think there was a risk that you've been exposed to HIV. It is effective up to 72 hours after exposure to HIV.

PEP is available on prescription from your GP or hospital. PrEP is not yet routinely available on the NHS but some people can access it via medical trials or buy it online.

## UNDETECTABLE

If a person living with HIV has an 'undetectable' viral load because they are on treatment, then they are non-infectious and they can't pass HIV on.

HIV organisations across the world are supporting a campaign called 'U=U' which means 'Undetectable equals Untransmittable'. This is a campaign to publicise the fact that a person living with HIV who has an undetectable viral load cannot transmit HIV to their partners.

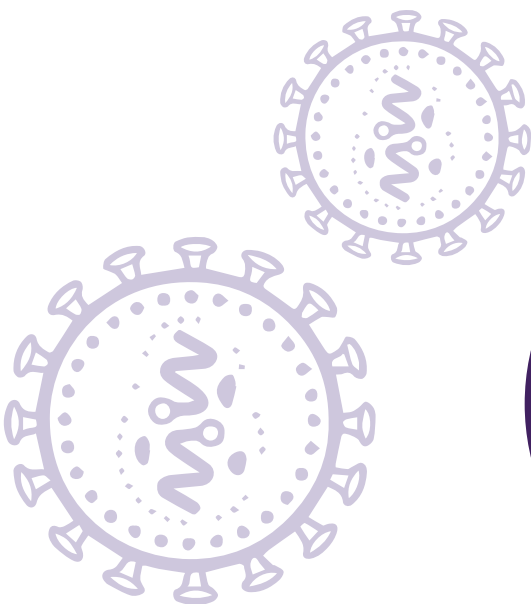


## TESTING FOR HIV

If someone thinks they have put themselves at risk of HIV infection, they should go and get a free and confidential HIV test at their local sexual health clinic or order a self-testing kit online if they prefer to test at home. Someone may believe they have been exposed to HIV if they have had sex without using a condom or PrEP, or if they have injected themselves using a needle previously used by someone else.

It is possible to get an HIV test with accurate results from 4 weeks after potential infection. Results can be returned from between 60 seconds to 2 weeks, depending on the test type.

Guidance recommends that people in high-risk groups who are having unprotected sex with new and casual partners should test every 3 months. High-risk groups include black African people and gay and bisexual men. However, anyone who is sexually active should be getting an HIV test at least once a year.



# HIV TIME -LINE

**1981**

The first case of AIDS was reported in the UK.

**1987**

The HIV is discovered by scientists in France and the USA.

**1990s**

The number of people living with HIV increased significantly due to the introduction of HIV treatment which meant that people were no longer dying of AIDS.

**2005**

People continued to acquire HIV so new diagnoses steadily increased reaching a peak of almost 8000 in 2005.

**2017**

It was reported that there has been a significant decline in new diagnoses of HIV for the first time as a result of increased testing, using HIV treatment as a prevention method and the use of PrEP by HIV negative people.

**2018**

There are now around 100,000 people living with HIV in the UK. The latest figures show that 4,363 people were diagnosed with HIV in the UK in the last year.

## HIV TREATMENT

HIV treatment is called anti-retroviral therapy (ART for short). It may also be referred to as anti-retroviral treatment or highly-active anti-retroviral therapy/treatment (HAART).

ART stops the HIV virus from replicating so it cannot damage the immune system. ART suppresses the virus to very low levels to the point where it can no longer be picked up by a test – this is when someone is described as having an ‘undetectable’ viral load.

HIV treatment is extremely effective and an HIV positive person on treatment can now lead a full and active life and has a normal life expectancy.

There may be some side effects from treatment, but these are less common with newer treatments and are increasingly well managed. Common side effects include diarrhoea, nausea or vomiting, headache, rash and tiredness. Some people living with HIV also experience problems which can't be helped by their HIV treatment (such as emotional and psychological difficulties) but the benefits of being on treatment are huge.

Those who do not know they have HIV until they've had it for a long time are at a much

higher risk of other long-term illnesses and may not live as long as other people. This is why it's always best to know your HIV status and get tested if you think you could have been exposed to HIV.

HIV treatment also has preventive benefits. Effective HIV treatment reduces the level of HIV in the body to what is clinically referred to as an ‘undetectable viral load’ (this normally takes around six months from starting treatment). If someone's viral load is undetectable, that means that they cannot pass on HIV, even when having sex without condoms.

Treatment also prevents vertical transmission of HIV – in the UK today, most women with HIV will give birth to HIV negative babies because they are receiving HIV treatment during their pregnancy.

There are just under 1,000 young people living with HIV in the UK. The majority of these young people acquired HIV through vertical transmission and have lived with it since birth. Growing up with HIV can be difficult for young people. They may feel unable to talk about HIV with friends, siblings and other family members for fear of stigma. It can also present extra concerns when considering relationships, school and accessing healthcare.

