

**AIDS & childbirth / AVERT.**

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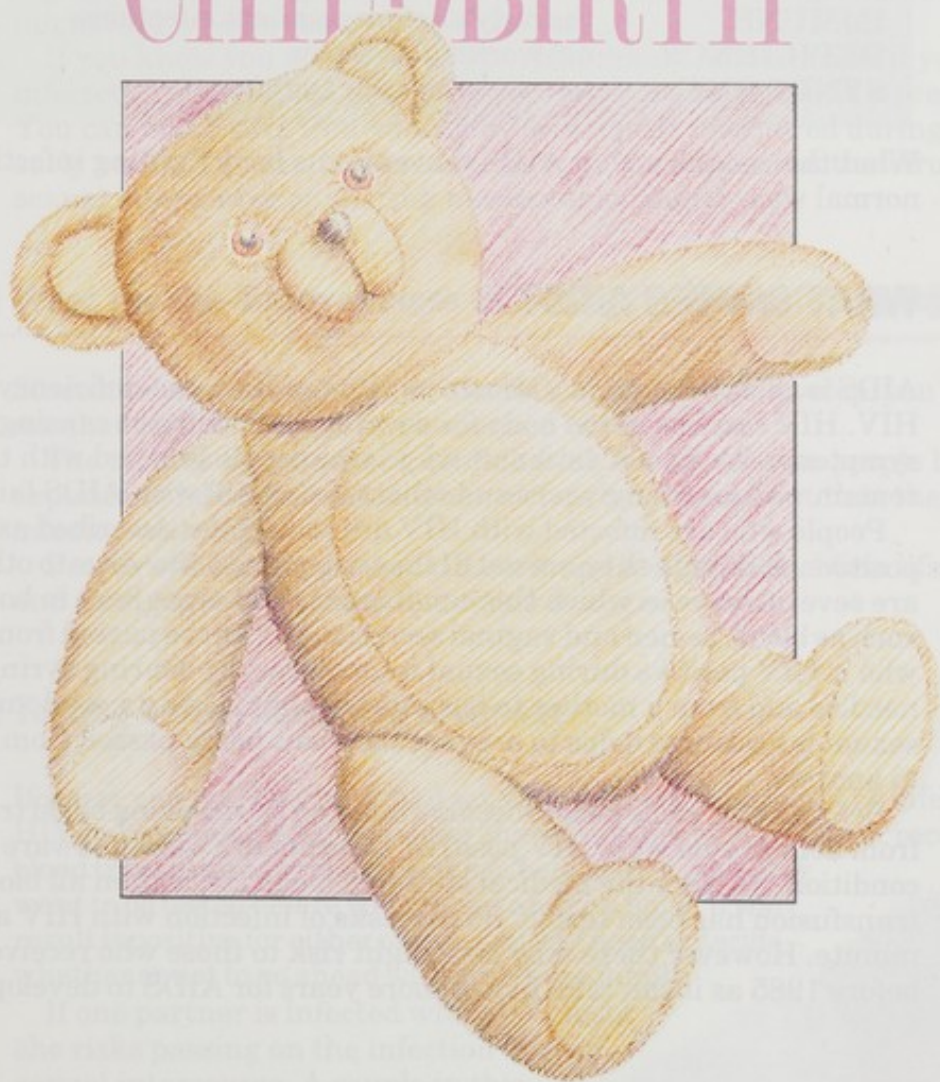
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Wellcome Collection  
183 Euston Road  
London NW1 2BE UK  
T +44 (0)20 7611 8722  
E [library@wellcomecollection.org](mailto:library@wellcomecollection.org)  
<https://wellcomecollection.org>

# AIDS & CHILD BIRTH



**AVERT**

## INTRODUCTION

This leaflet covers some of the questions that you may have about AIDS and childbirth. We outline the facts as far as they are known and the choices people can make. We cannot provide definite answers because AIDS is a new disease and we still have a lot to learn.

## WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS stands for:

- |                   |   |
|-------------------|---|
| <b>ACQUIRED</b>   | – from blood or secretions from an infected person. |
| <b>IMMUNE</b>     | – the body's defence against infections.            |
| <b>DEFICIENCY</b> | – not working properly.                             |
| <b>SYNDROME</b>   | – a group of signs or symptoms.                     |

What this means is that AIDS prevents the body fighting infections in the normal way.

## WHAT CAUSES AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus known as Human Immuno-deficiency Virus or HIV. HIV can live in the body for several years without causing any symptoms. We do not yet know why some people infected with the virus remain well for many years and others become ill with AIDS fairly soon.

People who are infected with HIV are sometimes described as HIV positive. Although they are not ill they can pass on the virus to others. There are several ways in which this can happen. The virus lives in body fluids such as blood, semen and vaginal secretions. It can be passed from someone who is HIV positive during sexual intercourse, by sharing syringes or needles and from a mother to her unborn baby. Using a condom during sexual intercourse helps to prevent the virus being passed from one person to another.

Before 1985, some people became infected by receiving blood transfusions from donors who were HIV positive. (The donors were unaware of their condition. So were the medical staff involved). Since then all blood for transfusion has been tested. So the risks of infection with HIV are now minute. However there may be a slight risk to those who received blood before 1985 as it can take five or more years for AIDS to develop.



## IS THERE A TEST FOR AIDS?

There is no test available for AIDS, but there is a blood test which detects antibodies to HIV. HIV antibodies show that the infection is present. The test cannot tell us if the person will remain well or go on to develop AIDS. It can only show if the person is infected with HIV and is infectious to others.

The test may need to be repeated because antibodies take some months to develop after the person has been infected with HIV.

### What are the advantages of having the HIV antibody test?

If you think you may have been in contact with HIV some years ago, you might find it reassuring to have the test.

If you know you are definitely at risk, it may help to know if you are infected. You can then decide whether to start, or continue a pregnancy. You can make sure that your baby is carefully monitored during his or her early years. You can also ensure that you do not pass on the virus through sexual intercourse or sharing needles or syringes.

### What are the disadvantages of having the HIV antibody test?

Since it takes some months for the HIV antibodies to develop, you may need another test before you can be certain of the result.

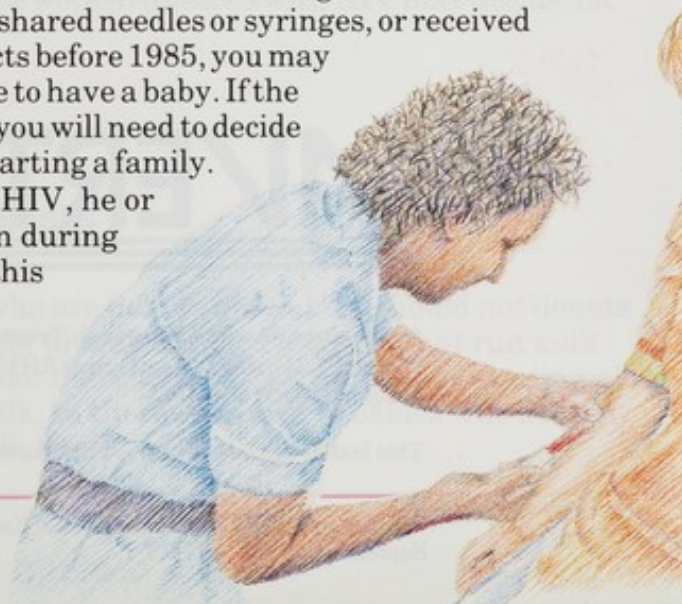
The test results should be confidential. However some people have experienced discrimination when others have found out that they are infected with HIV.

People who have been tested have found it difficult to obtain life insurance and mortgages even if the test result is negative.

### Testing before becoming pregnant

If you or your partner have had sex with someone who might be infected with HIV, or have injected drugs using shared needles or syringes, or received blood transfusions or blood products before 1985, you may want to be tested before you decide to have a baby. If the result is positive for either of you, you will need to decide whether or not to go ahead with starting a family.

If one partner is infected with HIV, he or she risks passing on the infection during sexual intercourse. A couple in this situation may decide that they cannot take the risk of having sexual intercourse without a condom and therefore choose not to have a baby.





## WHAT HAPPENS IF A WOMAN INFECTED WITH HIV GETS PREGNANT?

At present we cannot be certain about the effects on the mother or the baby if a woman is infected with HIV. Doctors need to study large numbers of pregnant women and monitor their babies for some time before we have definite answers. So, we can only deal here with the possible effects.

### Possible effects of pregnancy on a woman infected with HIV

We still do not know whether pregnancy increases the chances of a woman developing AIDS, but research is being done to find out as soon as possible.

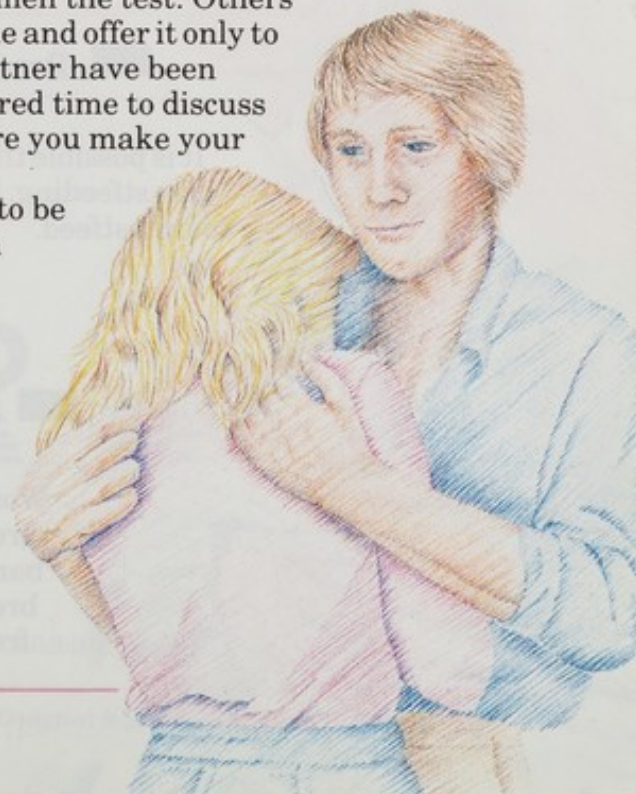
### Possible effects on the baby

HIV can pass from the mother to her unborn child. At first, it was thought that half the babies born to women infected with HIV would be infected. However it now looks as though far fewer are infected. It will be some time before we know definitely what the risks are.

### HIV antibody testing and pregnancy

Some doctors offer all pregnant women the test. Others see no advantage in testing everyone and offer it only to women who think they or their partner have been exposed to HIV. You should be offered time to discuss how the test might effect you, before you make your own decision.

Pregnant women who are found to be infected with HIV may be offered a termination.





## ■ Should the pregnancy be terminated?

We do not have enough information to be certain what is best. Some women infected with HIV decide to have the baby, knowing that the baby might be infected, and that a pregnancy could increase their chances of developing AIDS. Others choose a termination.

Women who are already ill with AIDS may decide to terminate the pregnancy. There is some evidence that a woman with symptoms of AIDS is more likely to have a child that develops AIDS. She will also have to think about whether she is likely to be well enough to care for the baby after the birth.

The decision to terminate a pregnancy is a very personal one, and is never easy to make. People facing this choice need good counselling and support so that they can decide what is best for them and be helped to cope with their feelings. Anyone who terminates a pregnancy for any reason needs time to grieve; someone who terminates because of AIDS or HIV will need to grieve not only the loss of that baby, but also the fact that they will probably never have another child.

## ■ PREGNANCY AND BIRTH

A pregnant woman who is infected with HIV should be treated in exactly the same way as any other pregnant woman. The birth will not be affected except that extra precautions to prevent others becoming infected may be taken during the labour and the stay in hospital.

The baby will be carefully checked at birth and with the mother's consent, may be tested for HIV antibodies. Further checks will also be made later as, at present, it takes a few years to be sure whether or not the child is infected with the virus.

## ■ Breastfeeding

It is possible that a very few babies have become infected through breastfeeding. So some women infected with HIV may decide not to breastfeed.

## ■ Milk Banks

Women who are infected with HIV should not donate breastmilk to milk banks. Hospitals that run milk banks, take the added precaution of heat treating all breastmilk, so there is no risk to babies who are fed from milk banks.

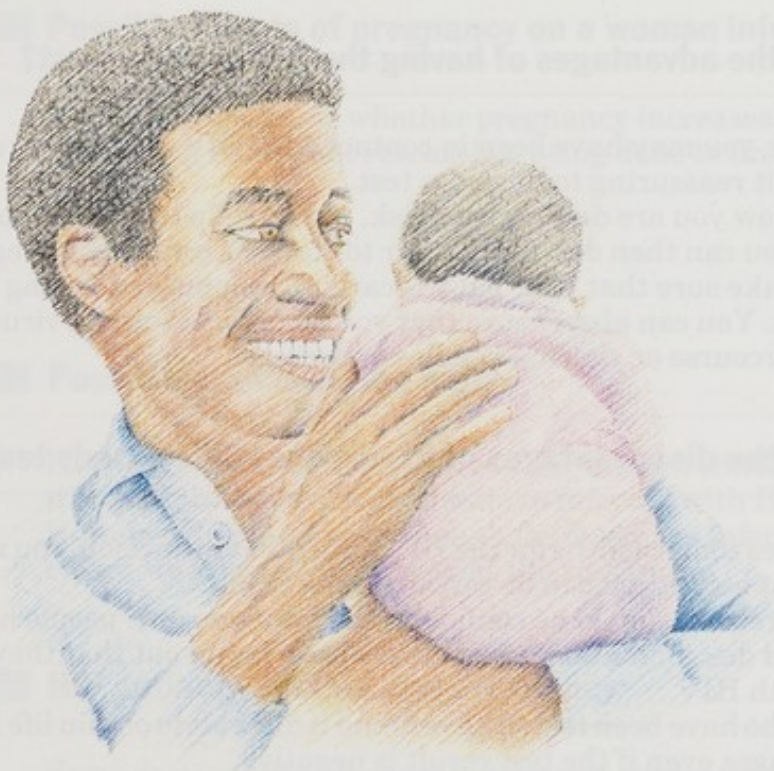




## MAKING DECISIONS

Because we know so little at present about AIDS and childbirth, decisions are especially hard to make. A great deal of work is being done to find out more, so our knowledge is changing all the time.

If you would like more information about what help may be available in your area, please do not hesitate to contact us by post or telephone. Your enquiry will be treated with strict confidence.



# **AVERT**

Aids Education and Research Trust  
PO Box 91, Horsham, West Sussex RH13 7YR  
Telephone 0403 864010

This leaflet has been endorsed by The National Childbirth Trust.

Written by Judith Schott & Annabel Kanabus. Designed & produced by CLA, Guildford.  
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