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We work with it ...



...so can you

## HIV and AIDS at work

Many people are still confused about HIV and AIDS. Much has been said and written about this illness, but it hasn't always been clear or accurate. There's one thing we can all be sure of: working with someone who has HIV or AIDS does not put you at risk of HIV infection.

## What is HIV? How is it spread?

This leaflet explains.

**nat**ional aids trust  
employers' initiative

## What are HIV and AIDS?

Many people still think HIV and AIDS are the same thing. They are not. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, which comes from infection by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV). Once infected with HIV people remain infected for life, although some treatments reduce HIV to undetectable levels in the body. People with HIV infection usually remain healthy for many years, showing no serious symptoms. Thanks to new treatments this period may be extended indefinitely for some people.

But in many infected people the action of HIV stops the body's natural defence mechanisms from working properly, leading to one of many illnesses that we call AIDS. The treatment of these illnesses has improved over the last fifteen years, but some remain fatal.

## How HIV - the virus that leads to AIDS - is spread

The virus is spread only in the following ways:

- sexually, through unprotected intercourse with an infected partner, male or female, gay or straight, where semen, vaginal secretions or blood enter the body. Using a condom reduces the risk of this happening.
- from exposure to infected blood (eg through sharing drug injecting equipment). All blood for transfusions in the UK has been screened for HIV since 1986, and blood products are treated to destroy the virus. There is no risk in giving blood.
- from an infected mother to her unborn child or new born baby.

There may be a small risk of infection in a few specialised jobs; eg laboratory staff who handle blood. And people whose work involves piercing the skin - tattooists, ear piercers and so on - should always take precautions against blood borne infections.



## How you can't get HIV

HIV is not spread through ordinary social and work contact. It's not spread by touch, or through water or air, or by coughing or sneezing.

So, you can't be infected by working alongside someone with HIV or AIDS, or by sharing all kinds of everyday utensils and appliances - eg cutlery, glasses, plates, telephones, tools, toilets or washing facilities.

There has been no case where a family member sharing a house with someone infected with HIV or someone with AIDS has been infected by sharing food utensils and household appliances.

## HIV, AIDS and work

People infected with HIV can remain healthy for many years and can work quite normally alongside their colleagues, operate machinery, handle food and so on. And those who have some HIV illness or have developed AIDS may be fit enough to work between bouts of illness.

## If someone in your workplace has HIV or AIDS:

- there is no need for any special precautions to be taken. Unless you are having unsafe sex with that person or you share injecting drug equipment with them, you are not at risk of HIV infection.
- there is no need to feel threatened or afraid. People with AIDS or who are HIV-positive need understanding and support: you should not be frightened or give way to prejudice. Instead, give them the same sympathy and support that you would expect from your work mates if you were seriously ill.

## First Aid

If you are a First Aider at work, you should carefully follow the basic hygiene procedures taught during First Aid training which protect you against a whole range of infections, including HIV.

Workers not trained in First Aid may also need to give help in an emergency. Remember to avoid direct contact with blood by wearing gloves or covering any cuts you have with plasters. Clear up blood spills using disposable towels; disinfect the area with bleach if it's safe to do so. No case of HIV infection has ever been reported as a result of mouth to mouth resuscitation (the kiss of life).

## Employment Rights

There is no reason for employers to refuse to employ people or sack anyone just because they have HIV or AIDS. Your employer can't force you to take a blood test for HIV unless this is in your contract of employment. Even if your work requires you to have regular medical check-ups, an HIV test can't be added without a legal change to your contract.

If you think you have been infected with HIV, go to a Special Clinic for advice (look in the phone book under GUM - Genito-Urinary Medicine, or STI - sexually transmitted infection) which will be confidential and anonymous if you wish, or go to your doctor. You can ring the National AIDS Helpline free for more information: **0800 567 123**

If you are HIV-positive you don't have to tell anyone at work, although it may be in your own interest to tell your employer if infection starts to affect your work. You can insist that your employer treats this information in total confidence. If you have symptoms that affect your work, your employer should consider making adjustments to your work or workplace to enable you to continue working.

If you are dismissed because you have or are suspected to have HIV you may be able to claim unfair dismissal. If you are HIV-positive and have symptoms or AIDS and are dismissed because of this, your employer may have contravened UK legislation on disability. Ask your union representative for advice, or seek legal advice.

## Travelling Abroad and Testing for HIV

If you are going abroad on holiday or as part of your job, pick up a copy of the Traveller's Guide to Health, free from any Post Office, or telephone 0800 555777 to order a copy. Some countries test visitors for HIV or ask for evidence of HIV status before issuing visas. You can find out if they do by contacting the country's Embassy or High Commission in London. If a test is needed, make sure you receive the necessary pre-test and post-test counselling. You can receive this counselling and be tested anonymously through any GUM or Special Clinic. The result will be confidential to you.

If you are asked to travel for work to a country with a high incidence of HIV or AIDS, ask your employer to give you advice about healthcare while you are away.

## How you can help stop the spread of HIV

Anyone who is sexually active, and anyone who is sharing injecting drug equipment is at risk of infection by HIV. There is no vaccine against HIV, and the treatments still being developed for its effects are complicated and do not work for everyone. We should all protect ourselves.

- If you have any doubts about your sexual partner, don't have unsafe sex. Using a condom reduces the risk of HIV infection.
- If you must inject drugs, don't borrow or share the equipment.



## Information and Advice

If you want more information about the HIV or AIDS policy at your place of work, look in your employee handbook or ask your employer or personnel department. Your union or staff representative may also be able to help. If you don't have a policy, consider asking for one to be introduced.

For confidential advice and information on HIV and AIDS generally, ring: National AIDS Helpline.

# 0800 567 123

calls are free and advice is available in community languages, 24 hour service.

Terrence Higgins Trust Helpline	0171 242 1010 (noon until 10pm)
THT legal advice	0171 831 0330 (office hours)
Legal advice, evenings	0171 405 2381 (7-9pm Mon & Wed)
Legal advice, email	<a href="mailto:advice@tht.org.uk">advice@tht.org.uk</a>

For more information about our Employers' Initiative:

National AIDS Trust	0171 814 6720 (office hours)
NAT website	<a href="http://www.nat.org.uk/nat/">www.nat.org.uk/nat/</a>
Email	<a href="mailto:employ@nat.org.uk">employ@nat.org.uk</a>

**nat**ional aids trust  
*leading partnerships to fight HIV*

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