

HIV, the answers : Q&A; / written by Jill Schettler.

Contributors

Schettler, Jill
ETR Associates

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

To Learn More

Contact your state or local health department, family planning organization or HIV/AIDS agency. Or call one of these toll-free numbers:

The CDC National STD and AIDS Hotline

(800) 342-AIDS (or 342-2437)

Spanish: (800) 344-SIDA (or 344-7432)

Deaf Access: (800) 243-7889 (TTD/TTY)

This brochure is not intended as a substitute for your health professional's opinion or care.

Written by Jill Schettler.

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ETR
Associates

1-800-321-4407

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HIV

The Answers

Q
&
A

What Is HIV?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV damages the body's immune system. The immune system protects the body from disease.

HIV is a disease with many stages. A person with HIV can range from being healthy to being very sick.

What Is AIDS?

AIDS is the stage of HIV when the immune system gets very weak. When this happens, other diseases and infections can enter the body.

People can have HIV for years without getting sick. They may look and feel healthy. They may not even know they are infected.

But people with HIV can pass the virus to their sex partners or to someone they share a needle with.

A pregnant woman with HIV can pass the virus to her baby.

Is There a Cure or Treatment?

There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. But there are treatments that can help people stay healthy longer. And HIV can be prevented.

How Do People Get HIV?

HIV is in the blood, semen or vaginal fluids of someone with HIV.

You can get HIV if:

- You have sex (vaginal, anal or oral) with someone who has HIV.
- You share needles and works to inject drugs.
- You share needles to inject vitamins or steroids or needles used for tattoos or piercing.
- HIV can be passed from a mother to the fetus in her womb, or to the baby during birth or breastfeeding.

You can't get HIV from:

- Donating blood.
- Casual contact such as hugging, dry kissing or sharing food.
- Telephones, toilet seats, towels or eating utensils.
- Tears, saliva, sweat or urine.
- Mosquitoes or other insects.

HIV does not travel in the air. It must get inside the body to infect a person.

Who Is At Risk?

It is not who you are but what you do that puts you at risk. **Anyone** who has sex or shares needles with a person who has HIV can get it.

You are at risk if:

- You have shared needles to inject drugs or vitamins or for tattooing or piercing.
- You have ever had sex (vaginal, oral or anal) with an injection drug user.
- You have had many sex partners, or have had sex with someone who has.
- You are (or have ever been) a sex partner of someone with HIV or someone at risk for HIV.
- You have ever been sexually assaulted.
- You have ever had a sexually transmitted disease (STD).

Babies born to women with HIV are also at risk.

How Is HIV Prevented?

You can help protect yourself from HIV:

- The best way to prevent sexual transmission is to not have sex.
- Having sex only with a lifetime partner who does not have HIV is safe.
- You can have sex that does not put you in contact with someone else's blood, semen or vaginal fluids.
- Use a new latex condom and a water-based lubricant every time you have vaginal or anal sex.
- Don't use oil-based lubricants. Oils in hand lotions, massage oils, Vaseline, etc. can cause the condom to leak or break.
- People who are allergic to latex can use plastic (polyurethane) condoms. These come in both male and female styles.
- For oral sex on a woman (or on a man's or woman's anus) use a barrier such as a dental dam, a latex condom cut and rolled flat, or plastic food wrap. Use a new barrier each time.
- For oral sex on a man use a new condom each time.
- Never share sex toys. If you do share, wash them well and cover them with a new condom each time.
- Don't inject drugs. If you do, never share needles or works.

- If you do share works, clean them before and after each use. Wash the syringe 3 times with clean water, 3 times with straight bleach and three times with clean water.
- Remember that alcohol and other drugs affect your judgment. Using them may lead to unsafe sex or injection drug use.

What Are the Symptoms of HIV Infection?

Many of the symptoms of HIV can also be symptoms of other illnesses or infections.

See a doctor if any of these symptoms persist:

- Unexplained weight loss greater than 10 pounds.
- Recurring fever and/or drenching night sweats.
- Unexplained tiredness.
- Diarrhea.
- Swollen glands, usually in the neck, armpits or groin.
- Unexplained dry cough.
- White spots or unusual sores on the tongue or mouth.

Special concerns for women:

Women with yeast infections that don't go away, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), genital warts, ovarian or cervical disease, or abnormal pap smears should ask about HIV testing.

What Is the HIV Antibody Test?

The HIV antibody test tells if a person has HIV. The test looks for antibodies to HIV in the body.

The test does not tell if you have AIDS or if you will develop AIDS in the future.

The sooner people are tested, the sooner those with HIV can begin health practices and treatment that can slow the progress of the disease and keep them healthy.

A pregnant woman with HIV can take medicines to reduce the baby's risk of getting HIV.

State and local health departments, AIDS organizations or private doctors can give the test.

Many areas offer free, *anonymous testing* and counseling. This means you do not give your name. Your test result will be reported only to you.

Another type of HIV test is *confidential testing*. Your result is told only to you, but it may also be put in your medical file. You should ask who has access to this file.

Home testing kits are available from pharmacies. The person mails a blood sample along with a code name or number and receives results over the telephone.

Consider taking the test if:

- You think you, your sex partner or someone you share needles with might be at risk.
- You are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant.