

What is HIV?

HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system, and if left untreated, this system becomes weaker until it can no longer fight off life-threatening infections and diseases.

If HIV is left untreated, it may take up to 10-15 years for the immune system to be so severely damaged that it can no longer defend itself at all. The rate at which HIV progresses varies depending on age, general health and background.

What are the symptoms?

When a person gets infected with HIV only non-specific symptoms (flu-like symptoms) may develop and you can be HIV positive for years without knowing it. Usually people only realise they are HIV positive once they start suffering from HIV/AIDS related illnesses.

Initial symptoms might continue for more than a few weeks and may include:

- Fever lasting for a few weeks
- Not wanting to eat normally
- Feeling sick or nauseous
- Swollen glands (groin, or under-arm, or back of neck)
- Headaches and muscle pain

How do you get HIV and how can it be prevented?

HIV is spread through body fluids such as blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk:

- Through contact with infected blood – do not share equipment used for intravenous drug use e.g. needles, syringes, and other equipment. Blood can get into these and HIV can be spread to the next user. If you have open wounds or cuts, wear gloves when working with blood.
- Unprotected sex with an infected person – practise safe-sex, use a condom when you have sex (vaginal, anal, or oral).
- From an infected mother to her unborn/newborn baby – HIV is passed on from an HIV positive mother to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

HIV cannot be transmitted through sweat, saliva or urine if these do not have blood stains in it.

What tests are available?

PathCare offers HIV testing, namely:

Tests looking for antibodies from your immune response and proteins from the virus (HIV 1+2 Ab and P24 Ag)

Molecular tests looking for the genetic material of the virus (Viral load testing, Qualitative PCR)

What treatment is available?

Antiretroviral therapy (ART) are the drugs that treat HIV. Many people living with HIV are taking treatment and staying healthy as a result. Current treatment for HIV is not a cure for HIV, but it can keep HIV under control very effectively.

If you are diagnosed with HIV, start using ART immediately, after consultation with your doctor.

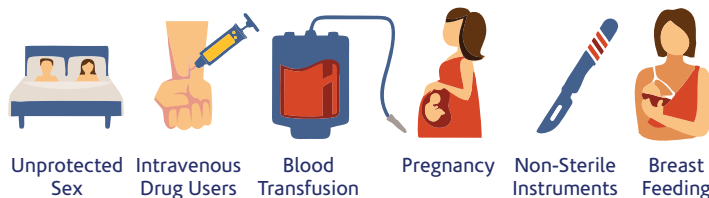
Taking treatment as prescribed by your doctor keeps you healthy and reduces your chances of passing HIV on to others.

There are many different antiretroviral drug combinations – your doctor can advise on your options.

Did you know?

- In normal circumstances HIV cannot survive if it is not in blood, so you won't get HIV from touching someone, hugging them or shaking their hand
- There is no HIV in an infected person's sweat, tears, urine or faeces if there is no blood in it.
- You can't get HIV from an insect that has bitten an infected person
- HIV can't survive in the air so coughing, sneezing or spitting cannot transmit HIV
- HIV cannot survive in air, water, or on surfaces outside drops of blood

HIV / AIDS is transmitted



HIV / AIDS is not transmitted



AIDS

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is a chronic, potentially life-threatening condition caused by HIV. HIV weakens the body's ability to fight disease, making you more vulnerable to infections. Infections that are rarely seen in those with normal immune systems can be deadly to those with HIV, and are known as 'opportunistic infections'.

Some of the common opportunistic infections and diseases are:

- Tuberculosis (TB)
- Candidiasis (thrush) – fungal infection affecting mucous membranes
- Gastrointestinal infections – infections that cause diarrhoea
- Cryptococcal meningitis – fungal infection of brain lining
- Pneumocystis Carinii Pneumonia (PCP) – lung infection
- Cytomegalovirus (CMV) – systemic viral infection which may affect many organs including eyes, oesophagus and intestines
- Some cancers like cervical cancer

People with HIV can get many infections or develop other illnesses. Many of these illnesses are very serious, and they need to be treated. Some can be prevented by the timely prescription of medication and others can be managed with early diagnosis and the correct treatment.

If you are infected with HIV you can avoid developing AIDS and still lead a normal healthy life for many years by:

- Taking care of your health
- Being positive about life
- Getting support from those around you

If you are HIV positive, it is very important to prevent passing the infection on to others

HIV and AIDS helpline 0800 012 322

HIV information portal www.hivsupport.co.za

Circle of Life HIV and AIDS Support Group

www.info4africa.org.za

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