

# HIV PREVENTION FAST FACTS

## What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. The virus attacks cells in your body that fight off infection and keep the body healthy. When HIV has damaged the immune system, someone is said to have AIDS, or acquired immune deficiency syndrome. As HIV takes hold the body produces antibodies in an attempt to fight the virus.

## Where is HIV found?

HIV is found in the bodily fluids of a person who has been infected - blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk.

## How is HIV transmitted?

Through:

- Unprotected sex (vaginal, anal and to a lesser extent oral sex) with an infected person
- Sharing contaminated syringes, needles or other sharp instruments
- From mother to child during pregnancy, childbirth or breast feeding when the mother is already HIV positive
- Blood transfusion with contaminated blood

All these ways of transmitting HIV can be prevented.

## Can I tell someone has HIV just by looking at them?

**No.** A person living with HIV may look healthy and feel good just like you. A blood test is the only way a person can find out if he or she is infected with HIV.

## Can I get HIV from shaking hands or other forms of social contact?

**No.** HIV is not transmitted through non-sexual day-to-day contact. You cannot be infected by shaking someone's hand, by hugging someone, by using the same toilet or by drinking from the same glass as a person living with HIV. HIV is not transmitted through coughing or sneezing like some other diseases. There is no need to fear social interaction with people living with HIV.

## What is the risk of getting HIV from kissing?

Transmission through kissing on the mouth carries virtually no risk; no evidence has been found that the virus is spread through saliva by kissing.

## Are mosquito bites a risk of infection with HIV?

HIV is not spread by mosquitoes or other biting insects. Even if the virus enters a mosquito or another sucking or biting insect, it cannot reproduce in insects. Since the insect cannot be infected with HIV, it cannot transmit HIV to the next human it feeds on or bites.

## Does HIV only affect certain risk groups like gay men or people who inject drugs?

**No.** Anyone who has unprotected sex with a person living with HIV can become infected. Similarly if HIV is present and someone shares contaminated injecting equipment with a person infected with HIV, or has a transfusion with contaminated blood they can become infected with HIV. Infants can be infected with HIV from their mothers during pregnancy, during labour or after delivery through breastfeeding.

## What should you do if you think you have been exposed to HIV?

You should immediately seek advice from a local health provider who may recommend counseling and testing for HIV or suggest a course of post-exposure prophylaxis. It's important to remember that if you have been newly infected with HIV you could be highly infectious during this early stage.

## What is post-exposure prophylaxis?

Post-exposure prophylaxis, or PEP, is a course of antiretroviral drugs prescribed within 48 hours of exposure to HIV to protect against infection. PEP is not 100% effective, even when started soon after exposure, so it is vitally important to try to take every measure to prevent transmission in the first place.

## How can you limit your risk of getting HIV through sex?

- ➔ Abstain from sex
- ➔ Remain faithful in a relationship with an uninfected equally faithful partner with no other risk behaviour such as injecting drug use
- ➔ Use male or female condoms correctly each time you have sex.

## How effective are condoms in preventing HIV?

Male and female condoms are highly effective in protecting against sexual transmitted infections including HIV. They need to be used every time you have vaginal and anal penetration. In order to achieve the maximum protective effect condoms must be used correctly all the time. Incorrect use can lead to condom slippage or breakage, thus diminishing their protective effect.

## How can people who inject drugs reduce their HIV risk?

HIV can be transmitted through the use of contaminated injecting equipment. But there are certain steps they can take to reduce this risk:

- ➔ If you cannot stop taking drugs completely change from injecting to non-injecting drug use (e.g. smoke or take the drugs orally)
- ➔ Never re-use needles, syringes, drug-preparation equipment and never share with other people.
- ➔ Use a new, sterile syringe (obtained from a reliable source, like a chemist or a needle exchange programme) to prepare and inject drugs each time.
- ➔ Use a fresh alcohol swab to clean the skin prior to injection.

## How can mother-to-child transmission be prevented?

Transmission of HIV from an infected mother to her child can occur during pregnancy, labour or after delivery through breastfeeding. The risk of mother-to-child transmission can be significantly reduced by:

- ➔ A short treatment of antiretroviral drugs administered to the pregnant mother before the birth and to the child after birth
- ➔ Caesarian section birth
- ➔ Seek advice from a health professional on breastfeeding. If possible avoid breastfeeding if you are living with HIV but only when replacement feeding is acceptable, feasible, affordable, sustainable and safe.

## Is it ever completely safe to have sex with a HIV-positive person?

There is a significantly reduced risk of infection if the person living with HIV has undetectably low levels of virus in their bodily fluids as a result of consistent adherence to treatment. However, avoiding penetrative sex or using condoms remains advisable.

## What is the risk of getting HIV through body piercing or from a tattoo?

A risk of HIV transmission exists if non-sterile instruments are used. Instruments that penetrate the skin should be sterilized, used once, then disposed of or sterilized again.

## Does male circumcision prevent HIV transmission?

Male circumcision reduces the likelihood of men acquiring HIV in unprotected sex. It only reduces, but does not eliminate, the risk of acquiring HIV through sex.