



HIV / AIDS and Women: What You Need to Know

HIV = Human Immunodeficiency Virus

AIDS = Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

What is HIV?

HIV, the Human Immunodeficiency Virus, is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV infections are treatable, but not currently curable. With new available treatment, HIV positive people have lived for many years with their infection.

Receiving a positive HIV test result means that you have been infected with the virus. Being infected with HIV does not mean that you have AIDS. Many people with HIV have no symptoms, and do not know they are infected. AIDS is a disease you get when HIV destroys your body's immune system. Normally, your immune system helps you fight off illness. When your immune system fails, you can become very sick and even die. Without treatment, the body's immune system may become so weak, that it cannot fight off infections or certain types of cancer.

HIV infection becomes AIDS when your CD4+ T cell count (a measure of the immune system) drops below 200 cells/mm³, and/or you develop an illness commonly seen with AIDS. Illnesses associated with AIDS include infections (tuberculosis, fungal infections, herpes) or cancers (cervical, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Kaposi's sarcoma).

How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread through close contact with the blood or body fluids of an HIV infected person through sex, sharing of needles, and receiving infected blood. HIV can also be passed from mother to baby.

Body fluids that can transmit HIV include:

- Blood or any body fluid containing blood
- Semen
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk

Health care workers may come into contact with the virus through other body fluids, such as:

- fluid surrounding the brain and the spinal cord
- fluid surrounding bone joints
- fluid surrounding a fetus

What makes you more likely to be infected with HIV?

- Sharing infected drug needles or syringes
- Having sex without condoms with someone who has HIV
- Having another sexually transmitted infection (such as herpes, chlamydia, gonorrhea or other infections)
- Having received blood products between 1978-1985
- Illegal drug use can lead to risky sex
- Having sex with someone with any of the above risk factors

How can I prevent HIV infection?

Avoid the risk factors listed above.

If you have sex, use condoms. This will decrease your risk of HIV infection.

The spermicide nonoxynol-9, although associated with protection from pregnancy, is also associated with an increase in HIV infection.

Mother to child HIV transmission

If you are HIV infected, you have about a 1 in 4 chance of giving HIV to your baby during pregnancy without any treatment. With early treatment during pregnancy, this risk falls to less than 1 to 2 in 100 chance of your baby becoming infected. This means that the risk of transmitting HIV to your baby falls from about 20-25% to less than 1-2% with treatment during pregnancy. In addition, if you are HIV infected, breastfeeding can also pass the infection to your baby.

It is very important that all pregnant women have an HIV blood test as part of the usual blood tests done early in pregnancy, so that if you are HIV infected, you can greatly decrease the chance of passing HIV to your baby.

What is HIV treatment?

Many medications are used to keep an HIV positive person healthy. For many people who start HIV (antiretroviral) therapy, their viral load, which is the amount of virus measured in the blood, drops to an undetectable level (below 50 copies/mL) within 16-20 weeks. However, HIV drug treatment is complicated, and different people have different results. HIV treatment can help people at all stages of HIV disease stay healthy.

What is an HIV test?

A simple blood test can determine if you are infected with HIV. The first blood test is an antibody test (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay) and, if this is positive, a second test is repeated on the same blood sample. If the sample repeatedly gives the same result, the results are confirmed using another more specific test such as the Western blot test.

You can ask your health care provider about this test. Free and anonymous testing is also available at your local public health department.

What are the benefits of knowing your HIV status early?

If you are pregnant, earlier treatment during pregnancy is more likely to prevent transmission to your baby. You will be able to receive earlier treatment for your health. This can prolong your life for many years if you are infected and do not know it.

You can take measures to prevent infecting others with HIV.

Where can you get more information about HIV?

Ask your doctor/health care provider or local public health department.

Remember:

- No one is immune to HIV.
- Young women are the fastest growing group of people in the U.S. with AIDS.
- Protect yourself from HIV. Use condoms. Avoid illegal drugs.

Websites

<http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/index.htm>

For Patients

<http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov>

<http://www.hivtest.org/index.htm>

<http://www.ashastd.org/stdfaqs/index.html>

For Health Care Providers

<http://www.aidsinfo.nih.gov/>

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