

# HIV: Risk Factors and Prevention

## What is HIV?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. AIDS is a life-threatening but preventable disease. HIV attacks the body's immune system. The immune system is the body's defense against infections. Over time, HIV weakens your ability to fight off serious infections and some cancers. When this happens, HIV infection becomes AIDS.

You can be infected with HIV and not have any symptoms for many years.

## Who is at risk?

If you are infected with HIV, you can pass the virus to other people even when you may have no signs of illness. The virus will be in your blood and in vaginal and sexual secretions, such as semen. It can be spread by contact with your blood, and it can be spread sexually during foreplay and vaginal, oral, or anal intercourse. Having anal intercourse or sex with numerous partners especially increases the risk of getting AIDS. People close to you, such as friends, family members, and roommates, do **not** have a higher risk as long as they do not have unprotected sexual contact with you or contact with your blood.

HIV can also spread to babies born to a mother infected with HIV. Babies may also get infected if they have breast milk from a mother who is infected.

The following groups are at high risk for getting infected with HIV:

- Anyone who has anal sex
- Men who have sex with men or with both men and women
- Men and women with more than 1 sexual partner
- Men and women whose partner has sex with more than 1 partner
- People who have sex and do not always use a latex or polyurethane condom
- People who share needles for IV drug use, tattooing, or piercing
- Babies born to or breast-fed by mothers who have HIV
- People given transfusions of blood or blood products in countries where the blood is not tested for HIV

## Who should be tested for HIV?

All teens and adults 15 and 65 years old should be tested for HIV. Younger teens and older adults who are at increased risk should also be screened. It's especially important to be tested if you are pregnant. If you are pregnant and HIV positive, treatment can help protect your baby from infection.

Talk with your provider about whether or not this test is recommended for you.

Ask your healthcare provider for an HIV test or ask where you can get the test in your community. Many community health centers, family planning clinics, hospitals, STD clinics, and county health departments offer testing. You can call

the CDC national 24-hour hotline at 1-800-232-4636 to find a testing center near you. You can also buy a home test kit at most pharmacies and drug stores. If your first test is positive, it means that you may be infected with HIV. You will then need a second, more specific blood test to confirm the results.

## **How can I keep from giving HIV to others?**

If you are infected with HIV, here are some ways to avoid spreading the virus to others:

- Tell your sexual partner(s) that you are HIV positive.
- Always practice safe sex. This means:
  - Use a latex or polyurethane condom every time you have vaginal, oral, or anal sex. Be sure to use a condom during foreplay as well.
  - Avoid getting blood, semen, or other sexual fluids near cuts in the skin or in the eyes of your partners.
- Do not use a spermicide containing nonoxynol 9 and don't use condoms coated with this spermicide. This chemical can irritate the lining of the vagina and rectum. These irritated areas make it easier for HIV to enter the body.
- If you use a lubricant during sex, use one that is water based. Do not use oil-based lubricants made with petroleum jelly (like Vaseline), mineral oil, vegetable oil, or cold cream. They can damage condoms.
- Do not donate blood, plasma, or semen.
- Do not plan to donate organs from your body. If you were listed as an organ donor, have that statement removed from your driver's license.
- Do not share or reuse IV needles and syringes. Do not share needles for tattooing or body piercing.
- Do not use abuse alcohol or other illegal drugs, such as nitrite inhalants (poppers) or cocaine. Use of these substances can affect your ability to make safe decisions and lead to risky behavior, such as unsafe sex.
- Do not share razors, toothbrushes, or anything that could be contaminated with blood.
- Tell your healthcare providers that you are HIV positive.
- If you are a woman, talk with your healthcare provider before you get pregnant. HIV may be spread to a baby during pregnancy, birth, or breast-feeding. There is medicine you can take during pregnancy to make it less likely that your baby will be infected.

For more information about HIV and AIDS, contact your healthcare provider or the 24-hour CDC hotline at 1-800-232-4636. You can also visit the AIDSinfo Web site at <http://aidsinfo.nih.gov>.

Developed by RelayHealth.

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