

Patient Talk!



The International Council of Nurses
Informed Patient Project

HIV / AIDS

Acquired **I**mmune **D**eficiency **S**yndrome or AIDS describes a collection of symptoms and infections caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus known as HIV. To stop the spread of HIV/AIDS, prevention, education and treatment are critical. Understanding the basic facts and knowing what to expect from health care services in your community can help combat the disease.

What is the difference between HIV and AIDS?

If someone becomes infected with HIV, they may or may not develop AIDS. Some HIV infected people stay healthy for months or years. Some get flu-like symptoms such as fever, headache, sore muscles and joints, stomachache, swollen lymph glands or rashes.

When infections become severe and difficult to manage, this is when HIV becomes AIDS. AIDS is different in every infected person. Some AIDS-related disease can include serious weight loss, pneumonia or cancer.

If left untreated, HIV can quickly multiply in your body and gradually wear down your immune system. If your immune system is damaged, viruses, parasites, fungi and bacteria that usually don't cause any problems can make you very sick. This is called "opportunistic infections".

How can a person become infected with HIV?

HIV does not spread easily from person to person. A person can become infected through HIV infected blood, vaginal fluid, semen and breast milk. This can happen during sexual activity, if you share equipment to inject drugs, through open sores or wounds or from the breast milk of an infected woman.

Coughing or sneezing, sharing household items or swimming in the same pool as someone with HIV will not give you HIV. Kissing on the mouth carries a very low risk. No evidence has been found that the virus is spread through saliva.

Remember, you can get HIV from an infected person who doesn't look sick or hasn't yet tested positive. Blood transfusions used to be a way in which people got HIV/AIDS. Find out if the blood supply in your community is screened for HIV.

Risk factors

Sex between men and injecting drug use are the main factors in the epidemic. However, anyone who practices risky sexual behaviour can get HIV. In some countries, more young people are becoming infected through unprotected heterosexual intercourse. In other countries, more women and sex workers are diagnosed with the virus.

When to consider HIV testing

HIV testing is the only way to know whether you have been infected. If you have any unexplained symptoms or feel that you may have been exposed to HIV, contact your health care professional and arrange for testing. If you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy, testing can help you take the necessary measures to reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to your newborn.

HIV testing looks for antibodies in your blood, saliva or urine. These antibodies are proteins produced by your immune system to fight HIV. If you are tested too early, you may not obtain positive results and may need to be re-tested. For accurate results, testing should be done two and six months after exposure. A positive result does not necessarily mean that you have AIDS. If your symptoms are severe and

the virus is quickly multiplying, your health care professional may recommend treatment.

Understanding treatment options

Antiretroviral treatment, better known as ARV medication, can help HIV-positive people live longer, healthier and more productive lives. However, ARV does not cure AIDS; it simply slows down the growth of the virus. If you are taking ARV medication you can still transmit the virus to others.

There are many types of ARV medication. For best results, a combination of three or more types of medication is recommended. There are special considerations for the treatment of pregnant women, adolescents, drug users and people with infections like hepatitis and tuberculosis. Treating HIV/AIDS can be complicated. An open relationship with your health care professional can help you find the right treatment.

ARV medication can cause side effects, in which some can be severe. ARV also interacts with other medication, recreational drugs, herbal products or certain foods and cause serious illness. Interrupting treatment can cause the virus to develop resistance to ARV. Discuss with your doctor if you wish to stop or change treatment.

Alternative therapies such as homeopathy and herbs, acupuncture and relaxation techniques are not designed to treat HIV. Some therapies can make you feel better while others may be dangerous. Talk with your doctor before choosing alternative therapy.

Your health care professional will want to know your lifestyle: be honest about it. Smoking, recreational drugs and alcohol should be avoided because they can weaken your immune system and cause infections. Nutrition, physical exercise, work patterns and adhering to medication are important issues that you may need to discuss and plan with your health care professional.

Pregnancy and HIV

If you are pregnant and HIV positive, you can reduce the risk of infecting your baby by taking

ARV medication and not breast-feeding. Your health care professional should provide you with the right obstetric management, ARV treatment and counselling.

Become involved in stopping the spread of AIDS

Partnership building between people, communities and countries is essential to the fight against HIV/AIDS. Whether you are HIV positive or not, you can play a vital role by becoming more active in your community.

HIV education and prevention programmes can help you change your ways, set your limits and respect other people's limits. Helping other people and trusting those who can help you are priority actions against AIDS. Know what is available in your community. Some communities have special programmes, like needle exchange and drug addiction programmes that aim at treating people and reducing the rate of HIV infection.

If you are HIV-positive, protect yourself. Any additional sexually transmitted infections or infections from a different strain of HIV can change your HIV status to AIDS. To stop the spread of HIV, infected and non-infected people should:

- Practice sexual abstinence or fidelity;
- Use male and female condoms;
- Not share drug injection equipment; and
- Protect open sores, eyes and mouth from contact with blood.

The stigma and discrimination linked to HIV/AIDS often prevent people from disclosing their HIV status and seeking treatment. In effect, this can only heighten the spread of the disease. Public education and awareness programmes can empower young learners, adults and HIV-positive people to challenge discrimination and stigmatisation issues.

For more information on HIV/AIDS search the following websites:

www.unaids.org
www.aids.org
www.fhi.org

www.hivnetnordic.org
www.avert.org

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