

What is HIV/AIDS?

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) attacks and destroys CD4 cells which are the disease-fighting cells of the immune system. As the immune system becomes seriously damaged, the infected person is more vulnerable to certain cancers and a wide range of other infections. Without treatment, HIV can gradually destroy the immune system and advance to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) which is the most advanced stage of the HIV infection.

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How does the virus get into the human body?

HIV transmission can occur when body fluids such as semen (including pre-ejaculation fluid), vaginal fluid or blood from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person. Sexual contact remains the major mode of HIV transmission. Other modes of transmission are through sharing of injection needles or transfusion of contaminated blood or blood products. Infected mothers can also transmit the virus to their babies during pregnancy, delivery and by breast-feeding.

What are the risk factors for HIV Infection?

Behaviours and conditions that put individuals at greater risk of contracting HIV include:

- having unprotected sex;
- sharing contaminated needles, syringes and other injecting equipment and drug solutions when injecting drugs;
- receiving contaminated injections, blood transfusions, medical procedures that involve unsterile cutting or piercing;

You do not get HIV from:

- touching another person such as shaking hands or social kissing;
- contact with eating utensils, water fountains, toilet seats, telephones, typewriters, etc.;
- tear drops, saliva, or sweat;
- using facilities such as public swimming pools, restrooms, or gymnasiums;
- being close to other people such as on a crowded bus, in a classroom, or restaurant;

Who should have an HIV antibody test?

You should consider an HIV antibody test if either you have or your sexual partner has:

- sexually transmitted infections;
- unprotected sex or multiple sexual partners;
- shared needles with somebody

How is HIV infection diagnosed?

Most HIV infected persons look healthy and have no specific or obvious signs or symptoms during the early phase of infection. It is impossible to tell if a person has the virus just by looking at, or talking to, him or her. A person with HIV can pass the virus to others even if he or she is asymptomatic. HIV infection is diagnosed by doing an HIV antibody test. A positive test result shows that you are infected, while a negative result (shown after the window period) means you are not infected. The period between the moments you get infected with HIV and when the antibody test shows a positive result is referred to as the window period. The window period of HIV antibody test is normally 3 months.

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During the window period, an infected person can transmit the virus to other people even though his/her HIV antibody test remains negative. Thus, it is advised that you should have the antibody test again after 3 months. During this period, you should practice protected sex and should not donate blood.

What will your doctor advice to you when you are having or are recommended for an HIV antibody test?

If you are having a test, you can ask questions to make sure you fully understand what a positive and a negative result means. The doctor will inform you of the test results and this information will be treated confidential.

If a preliminary test result is positive, a confirmatory test will be performed by the Department of Health. If the test result is negative, the doctor may also advise for an earlier repeat test during the window period, depending on clinical circumstances.

Should pregnant women get tested for HIV?

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend that all pregnant women should be tested for HIV as early as possible during each pregnancy. Women who are planning to get pregnant should also be tested.

What is the treatment for HIV?

Although there is as yet no cure for AIDS, significant advances and progresses in the treatment of AIDS have been made. Timely institution of these treatments makes a significant contribution towards improving the quality of life and survival in people infected with HIV. Treatment also reduces the risk of HIV transmission to other people. Therefore, it is important to get a diagnosis of HIV infection as early as possible.

How can I prevent myself from HIV infection?

- Protect yourself or your partner by using a condom when you are having sex.
- Avoid all sexual activities which can cause cuts or tears in the mucosal linings of the rectum, vagina, or penis.
- Do not share needles, syringes and other injecting equipment with other people.

References

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