

HIV/AIDS FACTS



Human immunodeficiency virus, or [HIV](#), is the virus that causes acquired immune deficiency syndrome ([AIDS](#)). The virus weakens a person's ability to fight infections and [cancer](#). People with HIV are said to have AIDS when they develop certain infections or cancers or when their CD4 count is less than 200. CD4 count is determined by a blood test in a doctor's office. Having HIV does not always mean that you have AIDS. It can take many years for people with the virus to develop AIDS. HIV and AIDS cannot be cured. Although people with AIDS will likely one day die from an AIDS-related illness, there are ways to help people stay healthy and live longer.

How Does HIV and AIDS Cause Illness?

HIV attacks and destroys a type of white blood cell called a CD4 cell. This cell's main function is to fight disease. When a person's CD4 cell count gets low, they are more susceptible to illnesses.

What Is AIDS?

AIDS is the final stage of HIV infection. When the immune system CD4 cells drop to a very low level, a person's ability to fight infection is lost. In addition, there are several conditions that occur in people with HIV infection with this degree of immune system failure -- these are called AIDS defining illnesses.

Both men and women can spread HIV. A person with HIV can feel okay and still give the virus to others. Pregnant women with HIV also can give the virus to their babies.

Common ways people get HIV:

- Sharing a needle to take drugs.
- Having unprotected sex with an infected person.

You cannot get HIV from:

- Touching or hugging someone who has HIV/AIDS.
- Public bathrooms or [swimming](#) pools.
- Sharing cups, utensils, or telephones with someone who has HIV/AIDS.
- [Bug bites](#)

Symptoms

Early Symptoms

In the initial stages of HIV infection, most people will have very few, if any, symptoms. Within a month or two after infection, individuals may experience a flu-like illness, including:

- Fever
- Headache
- Tiredness
- Enlarged lymph nodes in the neck and groin area

These symptoms usually disappear within a week to a month and are often mistaken for another viral infection, such as influenza (flu). However, during this period people are highly infectious because HIV is present in large quantities in genital fluids and blood. Some people infected with HIV may experience more severe symptoms initially or a longer duration of clinical symptoms, while others may remain symptom-free for 10 years or more.

Later Symptoms

During the late stages of HIV infection, the virus severely weakens the immune system, and people infected with the virus may experience the following symptoms:

- Rapid weight loss
- Recurring fever or profuse night sweats
- Extreme and unexplained fatigue
- Prolonged swelling of the lymph glands in the armpits, groin or neck
- Diarrhea that lasts for more than a week
- Sores of the mouth, anus or genitals
- Pneumonia
- Red, brown, pink or purplish blotches on or under the skin or inside the mouth, nose or eyelids
- Memory loss, depression and other neurological disorders.

Each of these symptoms can be related to other illnesses. The only way to determine if you are infected with HIV is to get tested

Who Can Get HIV?

Anyone can get HIV if they engage in certain activities. You may have a higher risk of getting HIV if you:

- Have unprotected sex. This means vaginal or anal intercourse without a condom or oral sex without a latex barrier with a person infected with HIV.
- Share needles to inject drugs or steroids with an infected person. The disease can also be transmitted by dirty needles used to make a tattoo or in body piercing.
- Receive a blood transfusion from an infected person.
- Are born to a mother with HIV infection. A baby can also get HIV from the breast milk of an infected woman.

If you fall into any of the categories above, you should consider being tested for HIV. The only way to know if you have HIV is to take an HIV test

Why is it important to test for HIV?

If you test negative, take precautions to keep yourself healthy.

If you test positive, immediately seek the treatment and support you will need. Also, tell anyone who was exposed to your blood, semen or vaginal fluid, including sexual partners or needle sharing partners.