

HIV/AIDS: Basic Information

What is HIV ?:

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus that causes AIDS. It attacks the immune system that gives our bodies the ability to fight infections. HIV finds and destroys white blood cells (T cells) that the immune system needs to fight disease.

There is no cure for HIV, but there are treatments available that can allow infected individuals to stay healthy for a long time.

What is AIDS?:

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and is the final stage of HIV infection. A person infected with HIV can live with it for years before it reaches this stage, even if they never received treatment. Having AIDS means that the virus has weakened the immune system to the point where the body has a difficult time fighting infections. A person is considered to have AIDS when they have 1 or more specific infections, certain cancers, or a very low number of T cells.

How is HIV transmitted?:

HIV is found in the blood, semen, vaginal fluid, and breast milk of a person infected with HIV.

It is primarily transmitted three ways:

1. Having unprotected sex with someone infected with HIV either orally, vaginally, or anally;
2. Sharing needles and syringes with someone who is infected with HIV; or
3. Being exposed to HIV before or during birth or through breast feeding (fetus or infant)

Because HIV is a fragile virus, it cannot live outside the body for very long. Due to this fact, day-to-day activities such as shaking hands, hugging, and casual kissing can not spread HIV. You cannot contract HIV from contact with toilet seats, drinking fountains, doorknobs, dishes, drinking glasses, food, or pets. It is also not possible to contract HIV from mosquitos.

What are the symptoms of HIV/AIDS?:

Flu-like symptoms, such as a fever, headache, and rash are among the first signs of HIV. They may come and go in the first couple of months after infection . More severe symptoms of HIV infection generally do not appear for many years.

How can I find out my HIV status?:

The only way to know your HIV status for sure is to get tested. There are several different kinds of tests available that analyze a blood sample, a urine sample, or a mouth swab.