

## HIV/AIDS

### What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV is a virus that attacks your immune system. Over time your immune system may grow weak and you can become sick with different illnesses.

Eventually, your immune system will no longer be able to defend your body from infections, diseases or cancers that can kill you. This advanced stage of the HIV disease is called AIDS.

### How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is found in the following types of body fluid:

- Blood
- Semen
- Vaginal fluid
- Breast milk

It can be passed from an infected person to another through:

- Unprotected sex (including vaginal, anal or oral sex, or by sharing sex toys)
- Sharing needles, syringes, water, spoons or filters to inject drugs or steroids
- Sharing needles or jewellery for a body piercing
- Sharing acupuncture needles
- Sharing sex toys, razors or toothbrushes
- An infected mother to her child during pregnancy or delivery, or during breastfeeding

In each of these routes, certain conditions must exist for HIV transmission to take place:

- There must be a source of infection (such as a body fluid infected with HIV).
- There must be an entry site into the bloodstream. This could be a break in the skin or absorption through the skin lining.
- There must be enough of the virus in the body fluid to establish infection.
- Blood, semen and vaginal fluid are of the greatest concern because of their high quantity of the virus.
- You cannot get HIV by touching someone or holding hands, drinking from a water fountain, sharing a plate or utensils, or by being bitten by a mosquito.

### What are symptoms of HIV/AIDS?

- After initial exposure to HIV, a person may develop a flu-like illness that lasts about 3-14 days.
- This is acute or primary HIV infection.

- Others may notice flu-like symptoms after 3 - 6 weeks. Some may never notice anything.

As the infection progresses, there may be severe or long-lasting symptoms such as:

- Swollen glands in the neck, underarm or groin area
- Recurrent fever including "night sweats"
- Rapid weight loss for no apparent reason
- Diarrhea
- Decreased appetite
- Constant tiredness
- Recurring vaginal yeast infections
- Changes in the menstrual cycle
- White spots or unusual mouth sores

### How can I prevent getting HIV/AIDS?

You can protect yourself by:

- Not having sexual intercourse
- Having sex with only one partner who only has sex with you (mutual monogamy) if both of you are uninfected

HIV transmission can be greatly reduced by:

- Using latex or polyurethane condoms or female condoms correctly from start to finish with each act of vaginal or anal intercourse
- Using a cut open latex condom or a dental dam during oral sex on a female
- Using a latex condom correctly during oral sex on a male
- Use only water-based lubricants with latex condoms (Oil-based lubricants like Vaseline can weaken a latex condom and make it break.)
- Having "outercourse" - activities that do not involve penetration such as kissing, massaging, hugging, body-rubbing masturbation
- Not sharing needles, syringes, water, spoons or filters for injecting, or other skin-piercing instruments

### How can I tell my partner(s) about a positive result for HIV/AIDS?

If you have tested positive for a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or HIV, previous partners will need to be told. This process is called partner notification.

- Partners will need to be told of the exposure to the STI or HIV, and given the opportunity for counselling, assessment, screening and treatment.
- The contacts could be needle-sharing partners, the parents of an infant who tests positive, or sexual partners.

- There are laws and regulations in all provinces and territories that require health care providers to report specific diseases.
- Public health authorities are responsible for making sure that partners are notified, as they have a right to knowledge and ongoing health. They will inform you on how far back to go in time in notifying partners.
- Public health authorities are available to assist you with informing your partners. If you wish, it can be done anonymously for you, and your name will not be revealed.

Contact The AIDS Network for support and information at [www.aidsnetwork.ca](http://www.aidsnetwork.ca) or 1-800-563-5483.