

Know the Facts About HIV and AIDS



AIDS, which stands for **acquired immune deficiency syndrome**, is a very serious disease that affects children, teens, and adults. It is caused by a virus called the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The virus is **acquired** and causes a **deficiency** in the body's **immune** system. AIDS has rapidly become a leading cause of death in young adults and children in many areas in the United States. Although there is treatment available, there is no cure for AIDS. The disease can be prevented by educating yourself and your children about AIDS and HIV, including the behaviors that can increase the risk of getting AIDS.

What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS. When someone is infected with HIV, it means the virus is attacking the immune system. The immune system is the body's way of fighting infections and helping to prevent some types of cancer. Damage to the immune system from HIV can occur over months, as sometimes happens in infants. Sometimes it occurs slowly over years, as more often happens in adults. AIDS is diagnosed in an HIV-infected person when the immune system is severely damaged or when certain other serious infections or cancer occurs.

Many people do not know they are infected with HIV because it can take many years for serious symptoms to develop. However, even if an infected person shows no symptoms, the infection can be spread to others. Many people with HIV infection look and act healthy. You cannot tell just by looking at people whether they are infected with HIV. A blood test for HIV is the only way to be sure.

How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread from one person to another through certain body fluids. These fluids include blood and blood products, semen (sperm), fluid from the vagina, and breast milk. The following are ways HIV can be spread:

- **By sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) with a person who is infected with HIV.** Both males and females can spread HIV. Latex condoms can help prevent the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). The safest way to prevent these diseases is to abstain from all forms of sexual intercourse until married or in a long-term mature relationship with an uninfected partner.
- **Through contact with an infected person's blood.** Sharing syringes or needles for drug use or for other activities such as tattooing or ear piercing can spread HIV. Accidental injuries from contaminated needles can also cause HIV infection. This can happen if a person comes into contact with used needles that have been thrown away. Rarely, HIV has been spread by an infected person's blood directly contacting the mucous membranes, cuts, scrapes, or open sores of another person.

- **To a baby by an HIV-infected mother** during pregnancy, labor, delivery, or breastfeeding.
- **Through blood or blood products from blood transfusions, organ transplants, or artificial insemination.** This occurs very rarely because donors of blood, sperm, tissue, and organs in the United States are tested routinely for HIV.

How is HIV *not* spread?

It is very important to know how HIV is **not** spread. Fear and wrong information about HIV and AIDS cause suffering to those who have been infected with HIV. Make sure you and your children understand that HIV **cannot** be spread through casual contact with someone who has AIDS or is infected with HIV.

You **cannot** get HIV in the following ways:

- Shaking hands
- Hugging
- Sitting next to someone
- Sharing bathrooms
- Eating food prepared by an HIV-infected person

Also, you **cannot** get HIV from the following:

- The air
- Insect bites
- Giving blood
- Swimming pools

Teaching your young child about HIV and AIDS

Children need to learn about HIV and AIDS at a very early age. By the time your children are 3 or 4 years old, make sure you have clearly explained the following to them:

- They should never touch anyone else's blood or open sores.
- They should never touch needles or syringes. If they see someone who is bleeding or if they find a needle or syringe, they should tell an adult. Remind your children never to touch a needle or syringe if they find one in the garbage or on the ground.
- AIDS cannot be caught by playing with HIV-infected children.

By grade-school age, your child should begin to have a better understanding of illness and body parts. Your child should begin to learn more about how HIV can and cannot be spread.

Teaching your preteen or teenager about HIV and AIDS

To avoid being infected with HIV through sexual contact, preteens and teenagers need to know that the **best** way to protect themselves against HIV and AIDS is to refrain from having any type of sexual intercourse. Urge your teenager to postpone sexual intercourse until married or in a long-term, mature relationship with an uninfected partner. Neither person should have any other sexual partners.

If teenagers do not postpone having sexual intercourse, then proper use of latex condoms and limiting the relationship to one partner will help them avoid HIV infection. This will also lower the risk of getting other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) such as syphilis, gonorrhea, Chlamydia infection, and genital warts. Adolescents should also know about other types of birth control. However, it should be emphasized that other forms of birth control do **not** prevent HIV infection or other STDs.

For more information for you and your adolescent, ask your pediatrician about the following brochures from the American Academy of Pediatrics:

- *Making the Right Choice: Facts for Teens on Preventing Pregnancy*
- *Deciding to Wait*
- *The Correct Use of Condoms: A Message to Teens*

HIV and drug use

Adolescents also need to know about the extremely high risk of being infected with HIV if they use drugs, especially intravenous (IV) drugs that are injected with needles. Sharing a needle or syringe spreads blood from one person to another. People who do not use drugs themselves but are having sexual intercourse with an HIV-infected drug user can also be infected with HIV. Sharing needles for non-drug use, such as for tattoos, ear piercing, intentional scarring or cutting with a razor or needle, or injecting drugs like steroids, can also spread HIV.

When talking to your adolescent about drugs, make sure your adolescent understands that using drugs is very dangerous. The risk of getting HIV increases even when non-IV drugs like alcohol or cocaine are used. This is because drugs affect a person's judgment and can lead to risky behaviors, such as having sex without a latex condom or having sex with multiple partners.

See the following brochures from the American Academy of Pediatrics for more information on drug use (including alcohol and tobacco) and children:

- *Marijuana: Your Child and Drugs*
- *Cocaine: Your Child and Drugs*
- *Alcohol: Your Child and Drugs*
- *The Risks of Tobacco Use: A Message to Parents and Teens*
- *Smoking: Straight Talk for Teens*

If your preteen or teenager is using drugs or alcohol or is involved in risky sexual behaviors, he is at higher risk of HIV infection. If you think your adolescent or child is at risk of becoming infected with HIV, it is very important to discuss this with your pediatrician.

Who should be tested for HIV?

Anyone involved in the risky behaviors mentioned previously *should* get an HIV test. Anyone who wants to know whether or not they have HIV can be tested. However, a negative test does not mean a person is uninfected if the risky behaviors took place only a few months before the test.

The following symptoms may suggest a need for HIV testing:

- Persistent fevers
- Loss of appetite
- Frequent diarrhea
- Poor weight gain or rapid weight loss
- Chronic lymph node swelling
- Persistent or recurring extreme tiredness or lethargy
- White spots in the mouth
- Recurring or unusual infections

While there is no cure for HIV or AIDS, there are medications that can help delay symptoms, help prevent the spread of HIV to an unborn baby, and help prevent additional infections in HIV-infected people.

HIV and AIDS are important issues to think about and discuss. Educating yourself and your family about HIV and AIDS is the best way to keep your family healthy. If you need more information, talk to your pediatrician. Most importantly, talk to your child or adolescent. Make sure she knows the facts about this serious yet preventable disease.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

American Academy
of Pediatrics



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