

HIV and AIDS: Questions and Answers

What is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that causes AIDS in people who are infected with the virus. HIV infects and destroys white blood cells, known as T lymphocytes. T lymphocytes are cells of the immune system that are vital for fighting and preventing infections. There are more than 56,000 new HIV infections each year in the United States.

What happens after infection with HIV?

Once HIV enters the body, it begins to multiply, infecting more and more T-cells, weakening the immune system. Usually by three months after infection, the body makes enough antibodies against HIV for an HIV antibody test to become positive. Antibodies are markers in the blood that identify and try to neutralize foreign objects like bacteria and viruses. A person is able to transmit HIV to others very quickly after infection.

If a person with an HIV infection begins to take antiviral medications before serious loss of T-cells, the amount of virus can often be kept at a low level, slowing the impairment of the immune system and delay and possibly prevent the development of AIDS.

What is AIDS?

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is an advanced stage of HIV infection when the immune system is severely weakened and can no longer effectively fight off infection, leaving those who have AIDS susceptible to diseases and medical complications. It is estimated that one million people in the United States are living with HIV or AIDS.

How does a person get HIV?

HIV is contained in four main fluids: blood, vaginal secretions, semen and breast milk. HIV is transmitted from an infected person to another by these fluids during sexual behavior (anal, vaginal, oral sex), through needle sharing, occupational injuries or from mother to child during pregnancy, at childbirth, or through breast feeding. Blood transfusion was once an important cause of HIV transmission, but testing of donors has made this extremely rare. HIV is not transmitted through casual contact or ordinary interpersonal activities. Kissing is generally a safe activity, except in cases when a person has advanced mouth or gum disease, bleeding or sores in the mouth. There is one documented case where HIV transmission is suspected through open mouth kissing, however, it is blood that transmits HIV, not saliva.

How can a person reduce their risk of getting HIV?

HIV is a highly preventable disease. Correctly using latex or polyurethane condoms with every sexual partner almost eliminates the risk of contracting HIV through sexual activity. Limiting your number of sexual partners, knowing your partners' status, not engaging in sex while drunk or high and not sharing injection drug needles also significantly reduces HIV risk.

Who is at risk for getting HIV?

Anyone can become infected with HIV. Having sex without a condom or sharing injection drug needles for any reason with a person who has HIV can result in infection. It is estimated that 25% of people infected with HIV do not know their HIV status. Engaging in any behaviors that allow the four fluids that transmit HIV to enter your body puts you at risk for HIV infection.

What are the riskiest behaviors which increase the chance of getting HIV?

In the spectrum of sexual activity, anal sex without a condom is the most risky, followed by vaginal sex without a condom. Sharing injection drug needles ("works") is also a high risk behavior for contracting HIV. Engaging in sex without a condom with multiple or anonymous partners and being the "receptive" partner versus the "penetrative" partner during sexual activity also increases risk. Having sex with someone who shares needles or has had unprotected sex with others increases your risk.

While oral sex without a condom or barrier is generally less risky than anal or vaginal sex, HIV transmission is possible.

Using a condom on a penis or latex barrier on the vulva significantly reduces the risk of HIV transmission during oral sex. Other behaviors that prevent a partner's fluids from entering your mouth also reduce risk of transmission.

How can a person be tested for HIV?

Ask your health care provider for an HIV test. Either a blood or oral sample will be taken to test for the antibodies for HIV. Antibodies can take up to three months following exposure resulting in an infection, to be detected by an HIV test. Everyone should know their HIV status as part of good, routine health care. McKinley Health Center offers free confidential HIV testing.

What happens when a person is diagnosed with HIV infection?

Huge advances have been made in the medical treatment of HIV. Early diagnosis and access to medical care are important in managing HIV. Antiviral drug therapy may be recommended to slow the process of HIV replication and therefore, the progression of HIV disease, including the onset of AIDS. The immune system of an infected person is carefully monitored and in most cases medications to suppress the virus are started when there is significant decrease in critical immune fighting T-cells. While situations vary, medication regimens to treat HIV are generally well-tolerated and convenient. Many people with HIV disease can expect to lead a life comparable to someone who is HIV-negative.

Why do some groups of people have higher HIV rates than others?

HIV continues to disproportionately affect certain populations in the United States, including men who have sex with men, and African Americans. The reasons for this are complex, and include poverty, homophobia, social stigma around certain behaviors and HIV disease, and access to medical care, testing and educational services.

Can HIV testing affect my health insurance coverage?

Simply being tested for HIV should not affect health insurance. Health insurance companies should not "drop" your coverage if you have HIV testing. Current laws protect health insurance coverage for those who test positive for HIV. Health insurance companies do make decisions about whether to provide coverage to individuals and employer groups, based on high risk and high cost diagnosis for heart disease, allergies, diabetes or HIV disease.

For more information about HIV or other sexually transmitted diseases, contact your health care provider or the sexual health educator at McKinley Health Center.

Resource

www.cdc.gov/hiv/topics/testing/resources/qa/qa_general-public.htm

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.uiuc.edu>