

## HIV and AIDS

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### Description:

*The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the virus that can lead to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). People who are infected with the virus are said to be HIV positive. Over time if left untreated (usually many years), HIV can affect a person's immune system, leaving the body less able to protect itself from disease. When the immune system has been badly damaged by HIV infection, people can get sick from related infections or cancers. At this stage of HIV infection, a person is said to have AIDS.*

### Transmission:

HIV may be transmitted when blood, semen or vaginal fluid from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person. This can happen through:

- unsafe - sex rectal, oral and vaginal
- sharing needles and injecting equipment contaminated with blood.

Mothers who are HIV positive can transmit the virus to their babies:

- during pregnancy
- during (a vaginal) birth
- when breast feeding.

HIV may also be transmitted through donated blood and blood products. However all blood, organs, tissues and semen donated in Australia are screened for HIV. The risk of getting HIV from these products in Australia is extremely low.

Most people with HIV look and feel well for many years and many may not even know they are infected. A blood test is needed to detect HIV infection.

If you find out that you do have HIV, anyone you have practised unsafe sex with should also be encouraged to have a test. If you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about telling your current or ex-partners, a member of your health care team can assist by contacting them for you. Your name is not mentioned to ensure it is a confidential process. It is very important for your partner's health and the health of other people with whom they have sex that this contact tracing occur.

If you think you or your partner have been at risk of infection, you can have a blood test through your local doctor or sexual health clinic. You have the right to a confidential coded test.

### Treatment:

Medical research has made great progress in reducing the impact of HIV infection on the immune system and managing the illnesses associated with HIV. Currently, while there remains no cure for HIV and AIDS close adherence to a treatment regime can often allow HIV positive people to lead long lives.

New forms of antiviral treatments to keep the virus from multiplying are able to provide the immune system with relief from HIV infection and allow it to strengthen. HIV positive people should consult an HIV specialist to ensure they have access to the latest treatment, management of any associated side effects and clinical advice. Adherence to treatment is an essential part of managing HIV and your care team can assist you to ensure you follow your medication regime correctly.

### Health Outcome:

Left untreated over time, HIV destroys the body's immune system. When the damage is severe, people can develop other life-threatening illnesses. At this stage of HIV infection, a person is said to have AIDS.

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### Prevention:

There is no vaccine to prevent infection. Practising safe sex and always using condoms when you have vaginal or anal sex is the best way to reduce your risk of getting or transmitting HIV through sexual contact. Using water-based lubricant with condoms is recommended. Oral sex represents only a small risk for the transmission of HIV but may still represent a risk for the transmission of other sexually transmissible infections (STIs). To avoid the risk of transmission of HIV or STIs, if you are giving a man oral sex (his penis in your mouth) he should wear a condom. Whether you are male or female, if you put your mouth in contact with your partner's anus or vulva while having sex, you should use a dental dam.

If you choose not to use a condom or dam to reduce the risk of the transmission of HIV, you should avoid oral sex especially if you have bleeding gums or ulcers and immediately after cleaning your teeth. Do not allow semen, vaginal fluids and menstrual blood to enter the mouth.

It can take six to twelve weeks after someone is infected with HIV before HIV is able to be detected in the blood through a blood test. This is called the window period. If you have had unsafe sex or may have been exposed to HIV through sharing needles or other injecting equipment, you will need to wait twelve weeks before a test will reliably say you have not been infected. During this time, always practise safe sex. Do not donate blood during this time.

It is important to consider the impact a positive result may have and what support mechanisms you might need. Testing through a sexual health clinic where support and treatment advice is readily available remains the best and recommended testing option.

If you or your partners have more than one sexual partner and do not use condoms, have regular sexual health checkups.

Do not have sex if you or your sexual partner has a genital sore or ulcer or a sexually transmissible infection. Other STIs enable HIV to spread more easily from person to person.

### Post Exposure Prophylaxis

Post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is a treatment that may prevent HIV infection when taken immediately after exposure to HIV, preferably within two hours, but it may still be effective if taken within 72 hours (three days) of exposure. It is a combination of anti-HIV drugs that must be taken exactly as prescribed at very specific times over a four week period. It is extremely important that a person who may have been exposed to HIV through contact with blood or body fluids from an HIV positive person seeks medical advice as soon as possible. For more information see related fact sheet - [Post Exposure Prophylaxis - HIV](#).

### Help and Assistance

For more information on HIV, you can talk to:

- your local doctor
- your local sexual health clinic
- Brisbane Sexual Health and HIV Service (07 3837 5622, website below)
- Queensland Association for Healthy Communities Inc (1800 155 141 or website below)

### Other Resources

- [Queensland Health Sexual Health website](#)
  - [Animated Movies](#)
    - [Blood to blood transmission and HIV and the immune system](#)
- [Community Based Services](#)

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- Queensland Association for Healthy Communities Inc. (QAHC)
- Queensland Positive People (QPP)
- Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations (AFAO)
- National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS, Australia (NAPWA)
- Brisbane Sexual Health and HIV Service
- HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis C website (multilingual)

### Related Content

#### Factsheets:

- Safe Sex
- Before your HIV test
- HIV contact tracing - client responsibilities
- HIV recent diagnosis
- HIV - Women
- Post exposure prophylaxis - HIV
- HIV and Oral Health - Queensland Positive People resource