

HIV THE FACTS

What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV damages the body's immune system so that it can no longer effectively fight off infections.

HIV is the virus that may result in AIDS but having HIV does not mean you have AIDS

AIDS stand for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS was first defined by scientist in the early 1980s as a marker point in the diseases process caused by HIV. Over time, HIV damages the body's immune system leaving people vulnerable to cancer and infections that healthy immune systems beat off. These are called opportunistic infections because they take the opportunity to cause disease when immune systems are damaged.

The process by which HIV damages the body is very slow which means that people can live for many years before showing any signs of illness. Even without the benefit of HIV treatment a person with HIV can be well and live with the virus for many years without developing AIDS. Now that effective treatment is available AIDS is no longer an inevitable later stage of HIV infection in the many countries where treatment is possible, including the UK.

HIV as a long term condition

The development of effective treatment means HIV is now a long term condition. People diagnosed with HIV today can expect a near normal life expectancy if they start treatment early and take it correctly.

The tolerability of treatments has also dramatically improved. Complex regimes with many side-effects have been replaced with just one or two pills, with fewer side-effects. One pill a day is now the initial treatment for someone newly diagnosed with HIV. This means that today someone who is diagnosed early and responds well to treatment will have a very different experience to someone who has been living with HIV for some time and gone through many different treatment options.

How HIV is and isn't passed on

For HIV to be passed – transmitted – from one person to another, a certain amount of the virus has to be present. While it can be found in saliva or sweat, the concentration is too low for infection to occur.

HIV is passed on through infected blood, semen, anal mucus, vaginal fluids or breast milk. The most common ways HIV is passed on are:

- Through unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse with someone living with HIV. Globally, this is the most frequent route by which the virus gets from one person to another.
- Sharing infected needles, syringes or other injecting equipment.

- From an HIV positive mother to her child during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding if no preventative steps are taken. If preventative steps are taken during pregnancy and birth the risk of mother to child transmission is less than 2 per cent.

Oral sex carries a very low risk, but if cuts, ulcers or diseased gums come into contact with infected bodily fluids HIV can be passed on.

Putting the risks into perspective

While HIV can be passed from one person to another during a single sexual act or sharing needles just once, it is not inevitable. Being exposed (put at risk if HIV is present) does not mean that one is automatically infected and it is important that reporting does not imply this. Of course, the more often someone takes risks, the more likely transmission becomes.

Transmission risks during sex increase greatly if either of the sexual partners has another sexually transmitted infection (STI).

The risks of passing on HIV are much higher in the first few months after someone has become infected. During this time, there is an extremely high level of HIV in the body, and it can take some time before the immune system can react and produce antibodies; a process called 'sero-conversion'. Of course so soon after infection most people are still unaware that they have been infected and therefore HIV can be unwittingly passed on.

HIV treatments, which greatly reduce the amount of HIV in the body, also reduce the chances of onward transmission. However, since the risk is not completely eliminated, unprotected sex or sharing needles remain a transmission risk even if the person living with HIV is on treatment.

Preventing HIV transmission

The most effective way to prevent HIV being passed from one person to another during sex is by using a condom.

While using condoms properly is very effective in stopping HIV infection, no one method ever provides 100 per cent protection, so 'safer sex' is a far more honest expression than 'safe sex'

Anal intercourse is considered by many as synonymous with gay men's sexual activity. But many gay men do not practice anal sex and in many cultures, heterosexuals do. So it is important not to make assumptions.

For injecting drug users, HIV is mainly transmitted through the sharing of needles and injecting equipment – so not sharing needles and injecting equipment but instead accessing clean needles/ equipment is an effective way to prevent HIV transmission. In the UK needle exchange centres can provide clean needles free of charge.

No risk and low risk

HIV is not contagious; it cannot be transmitted through surface-to-skin contact or through the air, so HIV can't be 'caught'. It is inaccurate to suggest HIV can be passed on by:

- Ordinary social or physical contact
- Kissing (including 'French kissing')
- Coughing or sneezing
- Sharing toilet seats or washing facilities
- Sharing cutlery, food or drink
- Using swimming pools
- Spitting.

In addition, there are some activities or events which may carry a theoretical risk of infection but where in fact the risk of HIV infection is so negligible as not to warrant concern or any action (see next section, Misconceptions about risk).

Testing and HIV

Early diagnosis of HIV is very important. Getting tested and diagnosed early not only improves the health outcomes for the individual but also means people are less likely to pass HIV on. In the UK over a quarter of people with HIV are undiagnosed, so encouraging people to get tested is very important.

Technology for testing HIV and knowledge about the signs of possible HIV infection have improved greatly over recent years.

Types of test

The HIV test is not a test for HIV per se, but for HIV antigens or antibodies produced by the body in its response to HIV infection. It is not a test for AIDS.

The majority of HIV tests in the UK are in sexual health or antenatal clinics, but increasingly tests are being promoted in other hospital settings, in GP surgeries, in pharmacies and outside traditional healthcare settings.

In most sexual health clinics in the UK, a small blood sample is taken from a vein in the arm. Saliva can also be used for antibody tests. In the UK, once someone has tested positive for antibodies to HIV or for HIV antigens and they find themselves within the healthcare system, they should then have a test that directly measures levels of HIV, known as their 'viral load'.

UK law and HIV

Discrimination against people with HIV is unlawful in the UK. There are a number of ways people with HIV are protected from discrimination in UK law.

The Equality Act 2010, which now incorporates the protections of the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 2005, defines everyone diagnosed with HIV as disabled and, therefore, entitled to the same protection against discrimination – in employment, getting goods and services, education, trade

union membership and accommodation (including letting and selling property) – as any other disabled person.

The Act also contains provisions to protect people with HIV from dual discrimination, based on their HIV status and their sexual orientation or their HIV status and race for example. It prohibits discrimination by association and perception, thereby protecting partners, families and carers of people living with HIV, as well as those sometimes assumed to be HIV positive such as gay or bisexual men or African men and women from high prevalence countries.

The UK Data Protection Act 1998 also protects people with HIV. Personal details, including health information, cannot be used or disclosed without authorisation. People with HIV are also further protected in the law against hate crime. This means that if a person is a victim of crime because of their HIV status, this is considered an aggravating factor by the courts, leading to enhanced sentences for the perpetrators of such crimes.

Preferred phrases	Inaccurate / inappropriate phrases
HIV HIV and AIDS	AIDS virus Full-blown AIDS HIV/AIDS
A person living with HIV [A person who is HIV positive (if diagnosed)	AIDS or HIV carrier AIDS 'timebomb' A person is HIV A(n) (HIV or AIDS) victim/sufferer
HIV test HIV antibody test HIV antigen test	AIDS test
Transmitting HIV Infected by HIV Acquiring HIV	Transmitting AIDS Infected by AIDS Catching HIV (or AIDS)
Recklessly infecting	Intentionally/ deliberately/knowingly Infecting (when applied to a reckless transmission charge)
Safer sex	Safe Sex