

HIV BASICS

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It's a virus that weakens the immune system. The immune system helps protect the body from disease and illness to keep us healthy.

Over time, HIV can damage the immune system, making it so weak that the body is vulnerable to serious infections and some types of cancers. This advanced stage is called AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

Thanks to highly effective HIV treatment, most people living with HIV never develop AIDS.

With proper treatment and care, people with HIV stay healthy and live long, full lives. And, when someone is on successful treatment, they can't pass HIV to their sex partners.

There is no cure for HIV, and there is no vaccine, but there are ways to protect yourself and others. Read on to learn more!

WHO CAN GET HIV?

Anyone can get HIV, no matter...

- your age
- your sex, gender or sexual orientation
- your racial identity

Note on language: Everyone has the right to use the terms that they feel most comfortable with to talk about their bodies. Where we have used terms for body parts in this resource, we include in brackets some of the alternatives that some trans and nonbinary people use.

HOW DOES A PERSON GET HIV?

HIV is only passed through certain body fluids that contain enough HIV to pass the virus. These are:

- blood
- semen (including pre-cum)
- rectal fluid
- vaginal (frontal) fluid
- breastmilk (chestmilk)

HIV can be passed when one of these fluids gets into the body of someone without HIV. This can happen through broken skin or through mucous membranes which are parts of the body made of soft, wet tissue—such as the vagina (front hole), rectum, foreskin or the opening of the penis (strapless).

HIV can't get through healthy, unbroken skin.

HIV is usually passed through:

- having sex without using protection (like condoms or HIV PrEP)
- sharing needles or other equipment to inject drugs, including steroids or hormones

Rarely, HIV can also be passed:

- to a child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding (chestfeeding)
- through getting a tattoo or body piercing with used or unsterilized equipment
- through a needle-stick injury, usually in a healthcare setting

HIV cannot be passed by:

- shaking hands or eating with someone who has HIV
- hugging or kissing
- coughing, sneezing or spitting
- swimming in a pool, sitting on a toilet seat or drinking from a water fountain
- insects or animals

Starting in November 1985, all blood products in Canada are checked for HIV. It is safe to get a blood transfusion in Canada. However, in some countries where the blood supply is not adequately tested for HIV, there is a risk of HIV being passed through donated blood or tissue.

HIV AND SEX

HIV can be passed during sex. But there are ways to protect yourself and your sex partners:

- Condoms and lube. Using a new condom with lube every time you have sex will help prevent HIV and other STIs (sexually transmitted infections), such as gonorrhea and syphilis.
- HIV treatment. When a person with HIV is on successful HIV treatment, they do not pass HIV during sex.
- HIV PrEP. If you are HIV-negative, you might consider using pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP). PrEP involves taking certain HIV medications to reduce the risk of getting HIV. A person starts PrEP before being exposed to HIV. Talk to a healthcare provider to find out if PrEP might be right for you.

- HIV PEP. If you are HIV-negative and may have been exposed to HIV, you can take post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) to reduce your risk of getting HIV. PEP involves taking certain HIV medications as soon as possible, within 72 hours of being exposed to HIV. PEP needs to be taken for 28 days.
- Choosing oral sex, masturbation and other sex acts that pose little or no risk of HIV.

HIV AND DRUG USE

HIV can be passed by sharing needles and other equipment used to inject drugs. This can also pass other infections like hepatitis B and C.

To protect yourself and others, use a new needle, syringe, cooker and filter, as well as sterile water and a fresh alcohol swab, every time you inject. This equipment should not be shared or re-used.

If you inject drugs you can consider using HIV PrEP or PEP to help prevent HIV.

Sharing equipment used to snort or smoke drugs can spread infections such as hepatitis B and C.

To protect yourself and others, never share equipment to snort or smoke drugs (such as pipes and straws). Use your own equipment every time.

HIV AND PREGNANCY

Without proper treatment and care, HIV can be passed from a pregnant person to their baby during pregnancy and birth. HIV can also be passed through breastfeeding (chestfeeding).

If you are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, get tested for HIV.

If you are HIV-positive, with proper treatment and care, you can have an HIV-negative baby.

If you start HIV treatment before pregnancy and maintain an undetectable viral load throughout your pregnancy, you will not pass HIV to your baby during pregnancy or delivery.

If you are not on treatment when you first get pregnant, starting HIV treatment as soon as possible dramatically lowers the chance of passing HIV to your baby.

To prevent HIV transmission after your baby is born, Canadian guidelines recommend feeding your baby formula instead of breastfeeding (chestfeeding). Talk to a healthcare provider you trust if you wish to breastfeed (chestfeed), so they can help you do so as safely as possible.

The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE HIV?

The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested. Speak to a healthcare provider about getting tested for HIV as well as for other STIs and hepatitis B and C.

You can have HIV without knowing – it is common not to have any obvious symptoms for many years. Your sex partners could also have HIV without knowing it.

If you test positive, you can get the treatment and care you need.

CAN HIV BE TREATED?

Yes, there are highly effective treatments for HIV. While treatment doesn't cure HIV, it does keep the virus under control. If you have HIV, taking treatment as prescribed can lower the amount of virus in your blood to undetectable levels. With proper care and treatment, people with HIV can live long, healthy lives.

It's best to start treatment as soon as possible after being diagnosed. The earlier you begin treatment, the better it is for your health.

People who are on successful treatment cannot pass HIV to their sexual partners. This is sometimes called U = U or Undetectable = Untransmittable.

With proper care and treatment, people with HIV can live long, healthy lives.

HIV AND THE LAW

In Canada, if you have HIV, you have a legal duty to tell your sex partners before having sex in certain circumstances.

HIV laws are evolving in Canada. For the most up-to-date information on HIV and the law, contact the HIV Legal Network (www.hivlegalnetwork.ca).

CONTACT INFORMATION

For more on HIV, contact:

- a public health unit
- your local sexual health or family planning clinic
- your local HIV organization
- an HIV and sexual health hotline
- your doctor or primary healthcare provider
- a community health centre or, in Quebec, a CLSC

To find these services near you, visit wheretocatie.ca.