

AIDS

How to reduce your risk of catching it

What is AIDS? AIDS (*acquired immunodeficiency syndrome*) is a disease caused by a virus called HIV (*human immunodeficiency virus*). HIV attacks the body's *immune system*. A healthy immune system is what keeps you from getting sick.

When people have AIDS, their bodies can't fight disease. They get sick easily and have trouble getting well. They usually die from an infection or cancer.

How do people catch AIDS?

HIV can only be passed from person to person through body fluids, like blood, semen and vaginal fluid. The most common ways to catch AIDS are:

1. By having unprotected anal, vaginal or oral sex with an infected person.
2. By sharing needles and syringes for injecting drugs with an infected person.

You're also at risk if you've had sex or shared needles with someone who has any of the risk factors for HIV infection listed in the box on the next page. Children born to infected mothers can also become infected during pregnancy or delivery.

Should I be tested for HIV?

You should think about getting tested for HIV infection if you think you're at risk. Most HIV antibody tests done by your doctor are accurate if you have them done three months or longer after you think you may have been infected.

The blood test for HIV works by looking for antibodies to the virus. These antibodies are made by the body after HIV infection. So the test isn't accurate until the virus has been in the body long enough for antibodies to be made.

What contact is safe?

HIV can't live very long outside the body, so you can't catch it through casual contact. You can't catch the virus by touching, shaking hands, hugging, swimming in a public pool, giving blood, or using hot tubs, public toilets, telephones, doorknobs or water fountains. You also can't catch it from food, or mosquitoes or other insects.

Risk factors for HIV infection

- Have had sex with a prostitute (man or woman).
- Are a man and have had sex with a man.
- Have had many sex partners or have had sex with someone who has had many sex partners.
- Have had a sexually transmitted disease (for example, gonorrhea, syphilis or herpes).
- Have had sex for drugs or money.
- Have shared needles to use drugs.
- Have had a blood transfusion or received blood products between 1977 and 1985.
- Are heterosexual and were born in a country where AIDS is common in heterosexuals, such as Haiti.

How can I avoid getting AIDS?

The best ways to protect yourself from getting infected with HIV are to:

- Not have sex with a person who is infected or is having sex with others.
- Practice “safer” sex if you do have sex.
- Not share needles and syringes.

You can't tell who's infected with HIV by how they look. It takes an average of eight years for symptoms of AIDS to develop after being infected with HIV. So even people who don't look or feel sick can give you AIDS.

What is “safer” sex?

No sex is completely safe. The safest kind of sex is sex between two people who don't have HIV infection, are faithful to one another and don't abuse injectable drugs.

If you have any doubts about whether your partner is infected or whether he or she is having sex with anyone else at all, use male latex condoms every time you have sex.

Never let someone else's blood, semen, urine, vaginal fluid or feces get into your anus, vagina or mouth. Male latex condoms should be used during all sex acts, including anal, vaginal and oral sex. For oral sex on a woman, use a condom split lengthwise to place between her body and her partner's mouth.

Using contraceptive creams, foams or jellies with the *spermicide* (sperm-killer) called *nonoxynol-9* along with a latex condom may improve your protection. This spermicide may kill HIV as well as sperm. The spermicide works best when put in the vagina too, rather than just on the condom.

Even latex condoms aren't 100% effective. How well they work depends on if you use them right. See the box below for some tips on how to use condoms, and follow the directions on the package.

Tips on using condoms

- Use a latex condom. Condoms made from natural membranes, such as sheep gut, aren't as good because HIV is small enough to get through the tiny pores in these condoms.
- Put the latex condom on an erect penis and unroll it to the base of the penis before *any* contact.
- Leave a space at the end of the condom to catch semen. Remove air pockets by pressing the air out toward the base.
- Use only water-based lubricants. Oil-based lubricants, such as petroleum jelly (Vaseline), mineral oil, cold cream and massage oils, can damage the latex.
- After ejaculation (“coming”), withdraw the penis while it's still erect. Hold the condom against the base of the penis so it doesn't slip off.
- Female condoms aren't as effective as male latex condoms, but should be used if the male won't use a condom.
- Don't reuse condoms.

What if I share needles?

If you do share needles and syringes, clean them twice with bleach and water to help kill HIV. Draw bleach into the syringe and needle, then squirt it out. Do the same with water. Do both steps again.



For further information about AIDS, contact the Centers for Disease Control National AIDS Hotline at 800-342-2437.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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