

HIV/AIDS

What is AIDS?

AIDS is a disease that causes the body to lose its natural protection against infection. It is caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The virus, which is found in the blood and other body fluids of infected individuals, attacks certain white blood cells that protect the body against illness. A person with AIDS is more likely to become ill from infections and unusual types of pneumonia and cancer that healthy persons normally can fight off. Currently, there is no vaccine or cure for AIDS.

How does someone get HIV?

HIV is not easy to get. Both men and women can become infected and can give the virus to someone else. HIV is found in the blood, semen and vaginal secretions of infected persons and can be spread in the following ways:

- Having sex – vaginal, anal or oral – with an HIV-infected person (male or female);
- Sharing drug needles or injection equipment with an HIV-infected person to inject or "shoot" drugs;
- Passing the virus from an HIV-infected woman to her baby during pregnancy, birth, or by breastfeeding.

HIV **cannot** be spread in the following ways:

- Shaking hands, hugging or simple kissing;
- Coughs or sneezes, sweat or tears;
- Mosquitoes, toilet seats or donating blood;
- Eating food prepared or handled by an infected person;
- Everyday contact with HIV-infected persons at school, work, home or anywhere else.

The most common modes of exposure to HIV are:

- Sex between men who have sex with men;
- Injectable drug use;
- Heterosexual contact, primarily with injectable drug users.

Because HIV-infected persons may look and feel healthy, many are unaware they are infected and able to infect others. Only an HIV antibody test can determine exposure to the virus. Too often, people at greatest risk of HIV infection do not know their high-risk behaviors can result in HIV infection, or they are unwilling or unable to change those high-risk behaviors.

How is HIV diagnosed?

An HIV antibody test, either from a blood sample or an oral sample, can tell whether a person's body has been infected with the virus. If it has, his/her immune system makes proteins called antibodies. It takes most people up to 12 weeks after exposure to develop detectable antibodies ("window period"), but some may take as long as six months. If a person's test is positive for HIV antibodies, it means s/he is infected and can infect others. If the test is negative, it generally means an individual is not infected. But, because the "window period" may be as long as six months, a person should be tested again if, in the six months prior to the test, s/he engaged in behavior that could transmit the virus.

Anonymous or confidential counseling and testing services are available at all local health departments and most community agencies, including some outreach testing sites. A trained counselor will help an individual understand the test, test results and how to protect his/her health whether the person is infected or not. A personal physician can also perform the test.

How can infection with HIV be prevented?

To avoid infection through sex, a person should not have anal, vaginal or oral sexual intercourse. An individual should only have sex with someone who is not infected and who has sex only with that individual. A person should use latex condoms always and correctly each time s/he has vaginal, anal or oral sex to greatly lower the risk of infection. Drugs can impair judgment. An individual should never share needles or injection equipment to inject drugs or steroids. HIV in blood from an infected person can remain in a needle, syringe or other item, and then be injected directly into the bloodstream of the next user.

Is HIV treatable?

People who are infected with HIV can do many things to live healthier and longer lives. First, they must take care of themselves by eating right, getting plenty of exercise and sleep, and by avoiding exposure to airborne and foodborne germs. There are also medications that slow the growth of the virus and delay or prevent certain life-threatening conditions. The Tennessee Department of Health provides FDA-approved prescription drugs through its AIDS Drug Assistance Program (ADAP) for HIV-infected patients who meet specific income guidelines.

For more information about STDs, talk to your health care provider or call:

The State of Tennessee HIV/STD Hotline: 1-800-525-2437

(Monday through Friday 8:00 to 4:30 p.m. CST)

OR

The CDC National STD Hotline: 1-800-227-8922

Other Informational Links:

American Social Health Association

<http://www.ashastd.org/>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www.cdc.gov/STD/>

E-Cards, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

<http://www2c.cdc.gov/ecards/index.asp?category=174>

Get Yourself Tested

<http://www.gytnow.org/>

National Institute of Health Medline

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/sexuallytransmitteddiseases.html>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

<http://www.womenshealth.gov/faq/sexually-transmitted-infections.cfm>

World Health Organization

http://www.who.int/topics/sexually_transmitted_infections/en/