

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

What is HIV?

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the cells in your body that help it fight infection and disease. The virus is found in blood, semen, vaginal secretions, breast milk and other body fluids that contain blood.

What is AIDS?

HIV weakens your immune system so you can become sick with illnesses that a healthy immune system could fight. If you are infected with HIV, you may develop AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). This disease occurs when HIV destroys your body's immune system. When your immune system fails you may become very sick and die.

Who is at Risk?

Anyone can get HIV. It is important to know how the virus is spread. The virus can be passed from an infected person to an uninfected person:

- during unprotected sex (sex without a condom)
- while sharing needles or syringes to inject drugs, or medical equipment used to prepare medicine for injection with a person who has HIV
- from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, delivery or breastfeeding.

You cannot get HIV:

- by working with or being around someone who has HIV
- from sweat, spit, tears, clothes, drinking fountains, phones, toilet seats, or everyday things like sharing a meal
- from insect bites or stings
- from donating blood
- from a closed-mouth kiss.

How can You Keep From Getting HIV?

You can do a lot to protect yourself from getting HIV:

- Do not share needles and syringes to inject drugs, steroids, vitamins, or for tattooing or body piercing. Don't share the equipment used to prepare drugs to be injected.
- Do not have sex or practice safe sex by using a condom for all sexual encounters.
- Be involved in a monogamous relationship with a known HIV-negative person. This means neither you nor your partner have sex with anyone else.
- If you are not involved in a monogamous relationship, use male latex condoms properly. The more people you or your partner have sex with, the greater your chances of getting HIV or other diseases through unprotected sex. HIV can be spread from just one act of unprotected sex.
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes.

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How can You Tell if You Have HIV or AIDS?

You can be infected and feel healthy. The only way to know if you have HIV is to take a test. You can go to a health care provider for a confidential test or buy a home collection kit (available at pharmacies).

- A negative test means there are no HIV antibodies. You are either not infected or you have been recently infected but your body has not made enough antibodies for a test to be positive.

If you think you have been exposed, you may want to be tested again in a few weeks. If you are at high risk for HIV, you should be tested every year.

- A positive test means you have been infected and your body has made antibodies to fight the infection.

The test results will be part of your medical record. The health care staff involved with your care will have access to your medical record. This information cannot be released to anyone without your written permission. The information will be released when mandated by law.

Positive test results must also be reported to the Minnesota Department of Health or Wisconsin Department of Health Services as required by law. These records are kept confidential.

If you go to other health care agencies the test result will be given when medically necessary. Any health care workers exposed to your blood or body fluids will be told of the test results.

Information adapted from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What Can You Do if You Have HIV?

If you do have HIV, there are treatments that can help you live longer. There are treatments that can prevent or cure some of the illnesses linked with AIDS.

- Find a doctor who knows how to treat HIV. If you cannot find one, talk with a health care provider or trained HIV counselor for a recommendation.
- Follow all of your doctor's orders and instructions. Be sure to keep all doctor appointments and take any medicines on a regular schedule.
- Get immunizations (shots) to protect yourself against influenza and pneumonia. Your doctor will give you specific instructions.
- If you smoke or use drugs not prescribed by your doctor, quit. Your doctor can help you find a treatment program that will be best for you.
- Eat healthful, well-balanced meals.
- Exercise on a regular basis.
- Get enough sleep and rest.

Whom Can You Call for Information?

If you need information on HIV/AIDS prevention, testing, counseling or treatment, call:

- Minnesota AIDS Project AIDSLine:
612-373-2437
- Wisconsin HIV Program:
Wisconsin AIDS Hotline 1-340-774-9000
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
National AIDS Hotline: 1-800-CDC-INFO
or 1-800-232-4636
- Minnesota Department of Health website:
health.state.mn.us (search for HIV)
- Wisconsin Department of Health Services
website: dhs.wisconsin.gov (search for HIV).