

Symptoms and stages of HIV infection

Symptoms.jpg



FAST FACTS:

- There are three stages of HIV infection.
- Stage 1 after initial infection can feel like flu, but not everyone will experience this.
- Stage 2 may last for 10 years or so, with no more apparent symptoms.
- Stage 3 is when the immune system has been so badly damaged that it can no longer fight off serious infections and diseases.
- The earlier you have HIV diagnosed and start treatment, the better your likely long-term health.
- Because many people do not have any symptoms for stages 1 and 2, HIV often gets transmitted from people who simply don't know they are infected.

The symptoms of HIV can differ from person-to-person and some people may not get any symptoms at all for many years. Without [treatment](#), the virus will get worse over time and damage your immune system. There are three broad stages of HIV infection, with different possible effects.

Stage 1: Acute primary infection

Around one to four weeks after becoming [infected with HIV](#), some people will experience symptoms that can feel a lot like flu. This may not last long (a week or two) and you may only get some of the flu symptoms – or none at all. Experiencing these symptoms alone is not a reliable way of diagnosing HIV.

You should always visit your doctor if you are worried you have been at risk of HIV infection, even if you don't feel unwell or have any of the following symptoms. They can then arrange for you to have an [HIV test](#).

Symptoms can include:

- fever (raised temperature)
- body rash
- sore throat
- swollen glands
- headache
- upset stomach
- joint aches and pains
- muscle pain.

These symptoms can happen because your body is reacting to the HIV virus. Cells that are infected with HIV are circulating throughout your blood system. Your immune system, in response, tries to attack the virus by producing HIV antibodies. This process is called seroconversion. Timing varies but it can take up to a few months to complete.

It may be too early to get an accurate HIV test result at this stage (depending on the [type of HIV test](#), it can take anything from a few weeks to a few months for HIV to show up), but the levels of virus in your blood system are very high at this stage. [Condoms](#) are the best way way to protect yourself from HIV when having sex. Using a condom is especially important if you think you have been exposed to HIV.

Stage 2: The asymptomatic stage

Once the seroconversion stage is over, many people start to feel better. In fact, the HIV virus may not reveal any other symptoms for up to 10 or even 15 years (depending on age, background and overall health). However, the virus will still be active, infecting new cells and making copies of itself. Over time this will cause a lot of damage to your immune system.

Stage 3: Symptomatic HIV infection

By the third stage of HIV infection there has been a lot of damage to your immune system. At this point, you are more likely to get serious infections or bacterial and fungal diseases that you would otherwise be able to fight off. These infections are referred to as '[opportunistic infections](#)'.

Symptoms that you may have during this time can include:

- weight loss
- chronic diarrhoea
- night sweats
- a fever
- a persistent cough
- mouth and skin problems
- regular infections
- serious illnesses or diseases.

What is AIDS?

It's important to understand that HIV and AIDS are not the same thing. AIDS is not a virus or disease in its own right - it is a particular set of symptoms. If a person develops certain serious opportunistic infections or diseases (as a result of damage to their immune system from advanced stage 3 HIV infection), they are said to have AIDS. There isn't a test for AIDS and you can't inherit it.

If you have advanced HIV (with AIDS-defining symptoms), it is really important to get the right treatment as soon as possible. With treatment it is still possible to recover from AIDS-related infections and diseases and bring HIV under control.

The earlier you have HIV diagnosed, and start treatment, the better your likely long-term health.

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Information Standard Logo



Sources:

[NHS Choices \(2014\) 'Symptoms of HIV'](#)

[AIDS.gov \(2015\) 'Stages of HIV Infection'](#)

[Terrence Higgins Trust \(THT\) \(2015\) 'Stages of HIV infection'](#)

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