

Symptoms and stages of HIV infection



FAST FACTS

- There are three stages of HIV infection. The symptoms vary in type and severity from person-to-person.
- Stage 1 after initial infection can feel like flu - not everyone will experience this.
- Stage 2 may last for 10 years or more.
- Stage 3 is when a person's immune system is very badly damaged and can no longer fight off serious infections and illnesses.
- The earlier a person is diagnosed with HIV and starts treatment, the better their long-term health.
- Some people don't get any symptoms during stages 1 and 2, but they can still pass on HIV. This is why HIV is often transmitted by people who don't know they have the virus.

The symptoms of HIV at each stage can vary in type and severity from person-to-person and some people may not get any symptoms at all for many years. Without [antiretroviral treatment](#), the virus replicates in the body and causes more and more damage to the immune system. This is why people need to start treatment as soon as possible after [testing](#) positive.

Stage 1: Acute primary infection

Around one to four weeks after [getting HIV](#), some people will experience symptoms that can feel like flu. These 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 healthcare professional if you're worried about or think you've been at

risk of getting HIV, even if you don't feel unwell or have any of the following symptoms. They can then arrange for you to [get tested](#).

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 once you have HIV it can take your body up to a few months to go through the seroconversion process.

It may be too early to get an accurate HIV test result at this point (find out more about '[window periods](#)'), but the levels of virus in your blood system are high at this stage.

Because you may not know that you (or your partner) have HIV, [condoms](#) are the best way to protect yourself and your partner when having sex. Using a condom is especially important if you think you have been exposed to HIV.

Stage 2: The asymptomatic stage

Once a person has been through the acute primary infection stage and seroconversion process, they can often start to feel better. In fact, HIV may not cause any other symptoms for up to 10 or even 15 years (depending on age, background and general health). However, the virus will still be active, infecting new cells and making copies of itself. HIV can still be passed on during this stage. If left untreated, over time, HIV infection will cause severe damage to the immune system.

Stage 3: Symptomatic HIV infection

By the third stage of HIV infection a person's immune system is severely damaged. At this point, they're more likely to get serious infections, or bacterial and fungal diseases that the body would otherwise be able to fight off. These infections are referred to as '[opportunistic infections](#)'.

Symptoms can include:

- weight loss
- chronic diarrhoea
- night sweats
- fever
- persistent cough
- mouth and skin problems

- regular infections
- serious illness or disease.

What is AIDS?

It's important to understand the difference between HIV and AIDS. AIDS is a particular set of symptoms - it's not a virus or disease in its own right.

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's important to get the right treatment as soon as possible. With treatment a person can recover from AIDS-related infections and diseases, and bring HIV under control.

The earlier you're diagnosed with HIV, and start treatment, the better your long-term health.

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Sources:

[NHS Choices \(2018\) 'Symptoms of HIV' \(accessed September 2018\)](#)

[AIDS.gov \(2017\) 'Symptoms of HIV' \(accessed September 2018\)](#)

[Terrence Higgins Trust \(THT\) \(2018\) 'Stages of HIV infection' \(accessed September 2018\)](#)

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