

How do you get HIV?

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FAST FACTS

- You can only get HIV through the bodily fluids of an infected person (e.g. blood, semen, breast milk).
- HIV can be transmitted during unprotected sex; through sharing injecting equipment; from mother-to-baby during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding; and through contaminated blood transfusions.
- HIV cannot survive outside the body. It cannot be spread through the air, from touching, toilet seats or shared cutlery.
- Using condoms during sex, avoiding shared injecting equipment, and taking HIV treatment if you are a new or expectant mother will protect you and those around you from HIV.

Despite what you may have heard, there are only a few ways you can get HIV. Here, we explain the ways you can get it and how to protect yourself from HIV infection.

How can you get HIV?

HIV lives in the following bodily fluids of an infected person:

- blood
- semen and pre-seminal fluid (“pre-cum”)
- rectal fluids/anal mucous
- vaginal fluids
- breast milk.

To get infected, these bodily fluids need to get into your blood through a mucous membrane (for example the lining of the vagina, rectum, the opening of the penis, or the mouth), breaks in the skin

(like cuts), or be injected directly into your bloodstream.¹

A person living with HIV can pass the virus to others whether they have [symptoms](#) or not. People with HIV are most infectious in the first few weeks after infection.²

Here we describe the main ways you can get HIV.

Sex without a condom

Having [unprotected sex](#) (sex without a [condom](#)) with someone who has HIV, particularly unprotected [vaginal sex](#) and [anal sex](#).

Sharing injecting equipment

Sharing needles, syringes or other equipment used to prepare and [inject drugs](#) with someone who has HIV.

Passed from mother-to-baby during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding

A mother infected with HIV can pass the virus to her baby via her blood during [pregnancy and birth](#), and through her breast milk when breastfeeding.

Contaminated blood transfusions and organ/tissue transplants

Receiving [blood transfusions, blood products, or organ/tissue transplants](#) that are contaminated with HIV. This risk is extremely small because most countries test blood products for HIV first.

If adequate safety practices are not in place, [healthcare workers](#) can also be at risk of HIV from cuts made by a needle or sharp object (needlestick injury) with infected blood on it. However, the risk of 'occupational exposure', is very low in most countries.

If you think you have put yourself at risk of HIV, the only way to find out if you have HIV is to have an [HIV test](#).

How can't you get HIV?

Some people wrongly believe that HIV can be spread by the air (even though HIV can't survive outside the body) and other ways such as by touching toilet seats or from mosquito bites.

See our page on [HIV myths](#) for more information.

How do I protect myself from HIV?

There are a number of ways you can protect yourself from HIV, including:

- using a condom every time you have vaginal, anal or [oral sex](#)
- avoiding sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment with anyone if you take drugs
- taking [HIV treatment](#) if you are a new or expectant mother living with HIV, as this can dramatically reduce the risk of passing HIV to your baby during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding
- asking your healthcare professional if the blood product you are receiving (blood transfusion, organ or tissue transplant) has been tested for HIV
- taking precautions if you are a healthcare worker, such as wearing protection (like gloves and goggles), washing hands after contact with blood and other bodily fluids, and safely disposing of sharp equipment.

For more detailed information on how to prevent HIV infection visit the relevant page listed below:

[Unprotected sex and HIV](#)

[Sharing needles to inject drugs and HIV](#)

[Pregnancy, childbirth & breastfeeding and HIV](#)

[Working in healthcare and HIV](#)

[Blood transfusions & organ/tissue transplants and HIV](#)

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- [1. AIDS.gov \(2014\) 'How do you get HIV or AIDS'](#)
- [2. NHS Choices \(2014\) 'HIV and AIDS - Causes'](#)

Last updated: 24 May 2017

Last full review: 01 May 2015

Next full review: 01 May 2018