What are HIV and AIDS?

What is HIV?

HIV is a virus that attacks cells in the immune system (the body’s natural defence against illness). The virus destroys a type of white blood cell in the immune system called a T-helper cell – also referred to as a CD4 cell – and uses these cells to make copies of itself.

As HIV destroys more CD4 cells and makes more copies of itself, it gradually weakens a person’s immune system. This means that someone who has HIV, and isn’t taking treatment for it, will find it harder and harder to fight off infections and diseases.

If HIV is left untreated, it may take up to 10 or 15 years for the immune system to be so severely damaged that it can no longer defend itself. However, the rate at which HIV progresses varies depending on age, general health and background.

Basic facts about HIV

- HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus.
- People with HIV can enjoy a long and healthy life by taking antiretroviral treatment (ART) which
is effective and available to all.

- The earlier a person is diagnosed with HIV, the sooner they can start treatment – which means they will enjoy better health in the long term.

- When taken properly, ART can reduce the level of HIV in the body (the viral load) to such low levels that blood tests cannot detect it (known as ‘undetectable’). Having an undetectable viral load means you cannot pass on HIV.

- Regularly testing for HIV will help you to know your status, and start treatment if you need it.

- HIV is found in semen (cum), blood, vaginal and anal fluids, and breastmilk. It is mainly passed on through unprotected sex (without a condom), sharing needles or syringes and during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding.

- HIV can’t be transmitted through sweat, saliva or urine. This means it cannot be passed on through coughing or sneezing, hugging, kissing, or sharing towels or a toilet seat with someone who has the virus.

Preventing HIV

Using male (external) condoms or female (internal) condoms during sex is the best way to prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

If you inject drugs, always use a clean needle and syringe, and never share equipment.

If you’re pregnant and living with HIV, the virus could pass into your baby’s body during pregnancy, birth or through breastfeeding. Taking HIV treatment correctly during pregnancy and breastfeeding can virtually eliminate this risk.

What is AIDS?

AIDS is a set of symptoms (or syndrome) caused by the HIV virus. A person is said to have AIDS when their immune system is too weak to fight off infection, and they develop certain symptoms and illnesses (known as ‘opportunistic infections’). This is the last stage of HIV, when the infection is very advanced, and if left untreated will lead to death.

Basic facts about AIDS

- AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. It’s also called advanced HIV infection or late-stage HIV.

- AIDS is a set of symptoms and illnesses that develop when an advanced HIV infection has destroyed the immune system.

- Fewer people develop AIDS now, as more people are on treatment for HIV and staying well.

Although there is no cure for HIV, with the right treatment and support, people living with HIV can enjoy long and healthy lives. To do this, it’s especially important to commit to taking treatment correctly.
HELP US HELP OTHERS

Avert.org is helping to prevent the spread of HIV and improve sexual health by giving people trusted, up-to-date information.

We provide all this for FREE, but it takes time and money to keep Avert.org going.

Can you support us and protect our future?

Every contribution helps, no matter how small.

PLEASE DONATE NOW

Photo credit: ©iStock.com/Vaniatos

Last full review:
03 July 2020
Next full review:
03 July 2023

Sources:
HIV.gov (2020) ‘What Are HIV and AIDS?’