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 – but not everyone will experience this.
- Stage 2 is when many people start to feel better and may last for 10 years or more. During this time a person may have no symptoms.
- 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 health will be over time.
- Some people don’t get any symptoms during stages 1 and 2, and may not know they have the virus, but they can still pass on HIV.

The signs of HIV infection can vary in type and severity from person-to-person, and some people may not have any symptoms for many years.

The stages below describe how HIV infection progresses in the body if it is left untreated. Without antiretroviral treatment for HIV, the virus replicates in the body and causes more and more damage to the immune system.

However with effective treatment, you can keep the virus under control and stop it from progressing. This is why it’s important to start treatment as soon as possible after testing positive.
Stage 1: Acute primary infection

The early symptoms of HIV can feel like having the flu. Around one to four weeks after getting HIV, you may start to experience these flu-like symptoms. These normally don't last long (a week or two). You may only get some of the symptoms and some people don't have any symptoms at all.

Symptoms can include:

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

These symptoms happen because your body is reacting to the HIV virus. Cells that are infected with HIV are circulating throughout your blood system. In response, your immune system 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.

Having these symptoms alone does not mean you definitely have HIV. The only way to know if you have HIV is by taking a test. 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 feel well and don’t have any symptoms. They can then arrange for you to get tested.

HIV will not always show up in a test at this early stage, and you may need to test again later to confirm your result (find out more about ‘window periods’). Your healthcare professional will talk to you about the timing of your test and answer any concerns. It’s important not delay speaking to a healthcare worker if you are worried about HIV.

In the early stages of infection, the amount of HIV in your blood is high and you’re more likely to pass the virus onto others. Condoms are the best way to protect yourself and your partner when having sex, especially 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 diseases that the body would otherwise be able to fight off. These infections are known 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?

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.

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 health will be. You can avoid getting opportunistic infections and stage 3 HIV, by adhering to antiretroviral treatment and looking after your health.

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Sources:

HIV.gov (2020) ‘Symptoms of HIV’