

How do you get HIV?

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Video of How do you get HIV?

FAST FACTS

- You can only get HIV by coming into contact with specific bodily fluids of someone living with the virus (e.g. blood, semen, breastmilk).
- 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.
- Using condoms during sex, or taking PrEP consistently will protect you from HIV infection through sex.
- Taking HIV treatment if you are a new or expectant mother, and avoiding shared injecting equipment if you use drugs, will also protect you and those around you from HIV.
- Effective treatment can lower the viral load of someone living with HIV to such low levels that they are undetectable in a blood test. This means that they cannot pass on HIV.

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 is found in the following bodily fluids of someone living with the virus:

- blood
- semen and pre-seminal fluid ('pre-cum')
- rectal fluids/anal mucous
- vaginal fluids
- breastmilk.

For you to get HIV, these bodily fluids need to get into your blood through a mucous membrane (for example, the lining of the vagina, rectum, or the opening of the penis), via shared injecting equipment, or through broken skin (such as cuts or sores in the mouth or tears around the anus).

There is not enough HIV virus in other bodily fluids, like saliva, sweat or urine, to transmit it from one person to another.

Someone living with HIV who has an '[undetectable](#)' viral load, meaning effective treatment has

lowered the amount of virus in their blood to levels where it cannot be detected by a normal blood test, cannot pass on HIV.

A person living with HIV with a detectable viral load can pass the virus to others whether they have [symptoms](#) or not.

HIV is most infectious in the first few weeks after infection. At this time many people are unaware of their [status](#).



The main ways you can get HIV are:

Sex without a condom

- having [unprotected sex](#) (meaning sex without a [condom](#), if you are not taking [PrEP](#)) 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 been exposed to HIV, the only way to find out if you have HIV is to have an [HIV test](#).

How can't you get HIV?

There are many myths about HIV. Some people wrongly believe that HIV can be spread through the air (even though HIV can't survive in air). HIV can't be spread through saliva, casual contact, touching toilet seats or from mosquito bites either.

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](#)
- in some countries [PrEP](#) is available. This is a course of HIV drugs which if taken consistently as advised by your healthcare professional prevents HIV infection through sex
- avoiding sharing needles, syringes and other injecting equipment
- taking [HIV treatment](#) if you are a new or expectant mother living with HIV, as this will 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
- if you think you have been exposed to HIV you may be able to access PEP, a 4-week course of ARV drugs taken after possible HIV exposure to prevent HIV infection. You must start PEP within 72 hours of possible exposure to be effective.

For more detailed information on how to prevent HIV infection visit the relevant page from the 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](#)

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.

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Sources:

[AIDS.gov 'How Is HIV Transmitted?'](#) (accessed March 2019)

[NHS choices 'HIV and AIDS - Causes'](#) (accessed March 2019)

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) 'PrEP'](#) (accessed March 2019)