Myths about HIV and AIDS

FAST FACTS:

- There are lots of myths around, but the facts of how you can get HIV, and how you can protect yourself, are very simple.
- By knowing the facts about HIV, you can save yourself a lot of worry and help to bust myths and misconceptions.
- One of the most common myths people living with HIV hear is that they can be cured. There’s no cure yet for HIV, but antiretroviral treatment works and will keep someone living with HIV healthy.

There are lots of myths and misconceptions about how you can get HIV. Here we debunk those myths and give you the facts about how HIV is passed on...

HIV can only be passed on from one person to another via the following bodily fluids:

- blood
- semen (including pre-cum)
- vaginal fluid
- anal mucous
- breastmilk.

HIV infection occurs when infected bodily fluids get into your bloodstream in these ways:
• unprotected sex (including sex toys)
• from mother to child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding
• injecting drugs with a needle that has infected blood in it
• infected blood donations or organ transplants.

If a healthcare professional has confirmed that someone living with HIV has an undetectable viral load (meaning effective treatment has reduced the amount of virus in their blood so that it cannot be detected through a blood test) there is no risk of transmission.

You cannot get HIV from...

Someone who doesn’t have HIV

You can only get HIV from someone who is already living with HIV.

Touching someone who has HIV

HIV can only be transmitted through specific bodily fluids so you can’t get HIV from touching someone, hugging them or shaking their hand.

Kissing

There is such a small amount of HIV in the saliva of a person living with HIV that the infection can’t be passed on from kissing.

Sweat, tears, urine or faeces of someone who has HIV

HIV can’t be transmitted through sweat, tears, urine or faeces.1

Mutual masturbation

Mutual masturbation, fingering and hand-jobs can’t give you HIV. However, if you use sex toys make sure you use a new condom on them when switching between partners.

Used condoms

Outside of the body, HIV in semen can only survive for a very short amount of time. So, even if a condom had sperm from an HIV-positive person in it, it would not pose any risk.

Air

HIV can’t survive in air so you can’t get it from sharing a space with someone who is HIV-positive.

Coughs, sneezes or spit

There is only a trace of HIV in these bodily fluids so they can’t transmit HIV.
Food, drink and cooking utensils

HIV can’t be passed on through sharing food, drinks or cooking utensils, even if the person preparing your food is living with HIV.

Toilet seats, tables, door handles, cutlery, sharing towels

You can’t get HIV from any of these as it can only be transmitted through specific bodily fluids.

Water

HIV can’t survive in water, so you can’t get HIV from swimming pools, baths, shower areas, washing clothes or from drinking water.

Insects

You can’t get HIV from insects. When an insect (such as a mosquito) bites you it sucks your blood only – it does not inject the blood of the last person it bit.

Animals

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, which means that the infection can only be passed between humans.

New or sterilised needles

New needles can’t infect someone because they haven’t been in contact with infected blood. If used needles are cleaned and sterilised they can’t transmit HIV either.

Musical instruments

HIV can’t survive on musical instruments. Even if it is an instrument that you play using your mouth, it can’t give you HIV.

Tattoos and piercings

There is only a risk if the needle used by the professional has been used in the body of someone living with HIV and not sterilised afterwards. However, most practitioners are required by law to use new needles for each new client.
It’s easy to get HIV through oral sex

The risk of HIV from oral sex is very small unless you or your partner have large open sores on the genital area or bleeding gums/sores in your mouth.

There is only a slightly increased risk if a woman being given oral sex is HIV-positive and is menstruating. However, you can always use a dental dam to eliminate these risks.

I’ve heard that you can prevent HIV with [insert here]

There are lots of urban myths about ways that you can protect yourself from HIV – from showering after sex or taking the contraceptive pill - to having sex with a virgin. In reality, if you are having sex, the only methods of HIV prevention are condoms or pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP).

Can herbal medicine cure HIV?

No. Some people choose to take alternative forms of medicine, such as herbal medicines, as a natural way of treating HIV. However, herbal remedies do not work.

Taking herbal medicines can be dangerous as they will not protect your immune system from infection. They may also interact poorly with antiretrovirals if you are taking them alongside treatment. The only way you can stay healthy when living with HIV is to take antiretroviral treatment as prescribed by your doctor or healthcare professional, and to attend viral load monitoring appointments (if available to you) to make sure your treatment is working.

If I get infected fluid from an HIV-positive person into my body
will I definitely get HIV?

No, HIV is not always passed on from someone living with HIV. There are lots of reasons why this is the case. For example, if the HIV-positive person is on effective treatment it will reduce the amount of HIV in their body. If a doctor confirms that the virus has reached undetectable levels it means there is no risk of passing it on.

If you’re concerned that you’ve been exposed to HIV you may be eligible to take post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP), which stops the virus from becoming an infection. However it’s not available everywhere and has to be taken within 72 hours of possible exposure to be effective.

Isn’t HIV only a risk for certain groups of people?

Like most illnesses, HIV doesn’t discriminate between types of people and the infection can be passed on to anyone via one of the ways mentioned above.

Some people are more vulnerable to HIV infection if they engage regularly in certain activities (for example injecting drugs) that are more likely to transmit the virus. However, it’s a common misunderstanding that HIV only affects certain groups.

While not everyone has the same level of HIV risk, everyone can reduce their risk of infection.

I’m HIV-positive and so is my partner so we don’t have to worry about HIV do we?

There are many strains of the HIV virus. If you and your partner are living with HIV you may each have a different strain and so would still need to protect each other from additional HIV infections. If you get infected with two or more strains of HIV it can cause problems for your treatment.

If you are on effective treatment and a medical professional has confirmed your viral load is undetectable, you will not pass HIV on through sex.

It’s easy to tell the symptoms of HIV...

The symptoms of HIV can differ from person-to-person and some people may not get any symptoms at all. Without treatment, the virus will get worse over time and damage your immune system over time. There are three stages of HIV infection with different possible effects.

Also, you also can’t tell by looking at someone whether they have HIV or not. Many people don’t show signs of any symptoms. And, for people living with HIV who are on effective treatment, they are just as likely to be as healthy as everyone else.
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Sources:
NHS Choices ‘HIV and AIDS – Causes’ (accessed March 2019)
CDC ‘HIV Transmission’ (accessed March 2019)