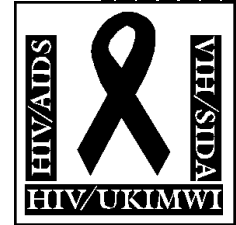


Frequently Asked Questions about HIV/AIDS



Q: *How do people get AIDS?*

A: AIDS stands for Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. It is a condition in which the body's immune system breaks down, and the person typically develops a variety of life-threatening illnesses. AIDS is caused by the HIV virus.

A person becomes infected with HIV when the virus is introduced into his/her body. The ways one becomes infected with HIV are:

- n by engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, oral) with an infected person
- n by sharing drug needles or syringes with an infected person
- n HIV-infected women can pass it on to their babies during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding.
- n infected blood transfusion.

Q: *How can I live safely with people living with HIV or AIDS ?*

A: It is useful to remember how HIV is transmitted (through unprotected sex; sharing needles or syringes; pregnancy, birth or breast-feeding; and blood transfusions). One doesn't get infected with HIV from the air, food, water, dishes, knives, forks, spoons, toilet seats, or anything else that doesn't

involve blood, semen, vaginal fluids, or breast milk.

Here are some measures you can take to ensure both your safety and that of the person who is diagnosed with AIDS or is sick from the HIV infection and needs care:

- n Wash your hands often, especially after you go to the bathroom and before you fix food. Wash your hands again before and after feeding a person living with AIDS, bathing them, helping them go to the bathroom or giving other care. Wash your hands if you sneeze or cough; touch your nose, mouth or genitals; handle garbage or animal litter; or clean the house. If you touch anybody's blood, semen, urine, vaginal fluid or feces, wash your hands immediately with warm, soapy water for at least 15 seconds.
- n If you have any cuts or sores, especially on your hands, you must take extra care to not infect the person with AIDS or yourself. If you have cold sores, fever blisters or any other skin infection, don't touch the person with AIDS or their things because you could pass your skin infection to them. If the rashes or sores are on your hands, wear disposable gloves. Do not use the gloves more than one time; throw them away and get a new pair. A person with AIDS often cannot fight off colds, flu or other common illnesses, so, if you or anybody else is sick, stay away from the person with AIDS until you are well.
- n A person with HIV infection or AIDS should not share razors, toothbrushes, pierced ear-

rings or any other item which might have their blood on it. Clothes and bedsheets used by someone with AIDS can be washed the same way as other laundry. However, if the sheets or clothes have blood, vomit, semen, vaginal fluids, urine or feces on them, use disposable gloves and handle the clothes or sheets as little as possible. Put them in plastic bags until you can wash them.

n A person living with AIDS does not need separate dishes, knives, forks or spoons. Their dishes don't need special cleaning either. They can eat almost anything they want; in fact, the more food the better. There are however, some precautions you should take:

- Don't use unpasteurized milk or raw eggs
- All meat and fish should be cooked very well
- Don't use raw fish or shellfish
- Wash your hands before handling food and wash them again between handling different foods, and wash fresh fruits and vegetables very well

The Center for Disease Control and the American Red Cross have a website which provides further advice on caring for people living with AIDS. The address is <http://www.hivatis.org/caring/>.

Q: *Can one physically identify a person with AIDS? What are the signs? How long does it take before the first signs appear?*

A: AIDS is caused by the HIV virus. From the time a person is infected, he/she can infect others, even if no symptoms are present. HIV can hide in a person's body for many years without producing any symptoms. Eventually, however, people infected with HIV can devel-

op many health problems. These can include extreme weight loss, tuberculosis, severe pneumonia, some forms of cancer and damage to the nervous system. These illnesses signal the onset of AIDS. In some people, these illnesses may develop within a year or two of the beginning of the HIV infection. Others may appear healthy for as long as 10 or more years before symptoms begin.

Q: *After being exposed to the virus, how long do I need to wait before I take the HIV/AIDS test? How is that test done? How long does it take to get the results?*

A: It takes an average of 25 days after a person gets infected with HIV for a blood test to show positive ("positive" means that the infection is present). 99% of infected persons will show positive after 3 months. If the first test (called ELISA) is positive, the blood will be tested again with another kind of test (called Western Blot) to make sure the person is actually infected. Results are usually back in 7-10 days.

Q: *What are the methods of protection?*

A: They are quite clear-cut:

- n Safe sex. To protect yourself, always use a condom during penetrative sexual acts — and learn how to use a condom correctly.
- n Do not share needles to inject drugs.
- n Avoid blood transfusions. If you are injured and lose blood, consider using a plasma substitute. If severe blood loss has occurred, make sure the blood used has been screened for HIV and Hepatitis B.

Q: *Do children/babies show the same signs and experience the same side effects of HIV/AIDS as adults? What are the signs of HIV/AIDS in children?*

A: Children and babies have different symptoms than adults. These are: unexplained fevers, failure to grow at the expected rate, frequent viral and bacterial infections.

Q: *What are the methods of prevention for mother-to-child transmission?*

A: If a mother is HIV positive, the chances of passing HIV to the baby are 15-25% if mother does not breastfeed, and 25-45% if mother breastfeeds. If the mother uses antiretroviral drugs—like AZT—and replacement feeding, the risks of transmission to the child decreases to 5-10%.

Q: *What does the word “TREATMENT” really mean when it comes to HIV/AIDS?*

A: There are many different types of drugs for HIV infection:

n protease inhibitors

n nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors

n non-nucleoside reverse transcriptase inhibitors.

Each class of drugs works on a different part of a replicative cycle of the virus.

Combination therapy (consisting of 3 drugs) has been shown to suppress viral replication for long periods of time and to decrease the chances of drug-resistant virus. In clinical studies this combination therapy has demonstrated a significant impact on the progression of the disease and has increased survival time.

The decision about when to start treatment is taken after additional medical tests are done.

Q: *In Washington, D.C., where can I get tested confidentially for HIV?*

A: The Whitman Walker Clinic offers confidential HIV counseling & testing to the general public.

The Clinic does testing at three sites:

1. the Elizabeth Taylor Medical Center, at 1704 14th Street NW. Call for testing times. Call (202) 332-EXAM to schedule an anonymous appointment for testing (no name, number assigned). Pre and post test counseling is also available.
2. the Max Robinson Center, 2301 Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. SE. Call (202) 678-8877 for information on how to schedule an anonymous appointment.
3. the Whitman-Walker Clinic of Northern VA. Call (703) 237-4900 for information.

