



CONNECTICUT Clearinghouse

A Program of Wheeler Clinic

800.232.4424 (Voice/TTY) 860.793.9813 (Fax)
www.ctclearinghouse.org



A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

HIV and AIDS: Are You at Risk?

What is HIV and how can I get it?

HIV - the human immunodeficiency virus - is a virus that kills your body's "CD4 cells." CD4 cells (also called T-helper cells) help your body fight off infection and disease. HIV can be passed from person to person if someone with HIV infection has sex with or shares drug injection needles with another person. It also can be passed from a mother to her baby when she is pregnant, when she delivers the baby, or if she breast-feeds her baby.

What is AIDS?

AIDS - the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome - is a disease you get when HIV destroys your body's immune system. Normally, your immune system helps you fight off illness. When your immune system fails you can become very sick and can die.

What do I need to know about HIV?

The first cases of AIDS were identified in the United States in 1981, but AIDS most likely existed here and in other parts of the world for many years before that time. In 1984 scientists proved that HIV causes AIDS.

Anyone can get HIV. The most important thing to know is how you can get the virus.

You can get HIV:

- By having unprotected sex- sex without a condom- with someone who has HIV. The virus can be in an infected person's blood, semen, or vaginal secretions and can enter your body through tiny cuts or sores in your skin, or in the lining of your vagina, penis, rectum, or mouth.
- By sharing a needle and syringe to inject drugs or sharing drug equipment used to prepare drugs for injection with someone who has HIV.
- From a blood transfusion or blood clotting factor that you got before 1985. (But today it is unlikely you could get infected that way because all blood in the United States has been tested for HIV since 1985.)



Babies born to women with HIV also can become infected during pregnancy, birth, or breast-feeding.



You cannot get HIV:

- By working with or being around someone who has HIV.
- From sweat, spit, tears, clothes, drinking fountains, phones, toilet seats, or through everyday things like sharing a meal.
- From insect bites or stings.
- From donating blood.
- From a closed-mouth kiss (but there is a very small chance of getting it from open-mouthed or "French" kissing with an infected person because of possible blood contact).

How can I protect myself?

- Don't share needles and syringes used to inject drugs, steroids, vitamins, or for tattooing or body piercing. Also, don't share equipment ("works") used to prepare drugs to be injected. Many people have been infected with HIV, hepatitis, and other germs this way. Germs from an infected person can stay in a needle and then be injected directly into the next person who uses the needle.
- The surest way to avoid transmission of sexually transmitted diseases is to abstain from sexual intercourse, or to be in a longterm mutually monogamous relationship with a partner who has been tested and you know is uninfected.
- For persons whose sexual behaviors place them at risk for STDs, correct and consistent use of the male latex condom can reduce the risk of STD transmission. However, no protective method is 100 percent effective, and condom use cannot guarantee absolute protection against any STD. The more sex partners you have, the greater your chances are of getting HIV or other diseases passed through sex.

(continued)

- Condoms lubricated with spermicides are no more effective than other lubricated condoms in protecting against the transmission of HIV and other STDs. In order to achieve the protective effect of condoms, they must be used correctly and consistently. Incorrect use can lead to condom slippage or breakage, thus diminishing their protective effect. Inconsistent use, e.g., failure to use condoms with every act of intercourse, can lead to STD transmission because transmission can occur with a single act of intercourse.
- Don't share razors or toothbrushes because of the possibility of contact with blood.
- If you are pregnant or think you might be soon, talk to a doctor or your local health department about being tested for HIV. Drug treatments are available to help you and reduce the chance of passing HIV to your baby if you have it.

How do I know if I have HIV or AIDS?

You might have HIV and still feel perfectly healthy. **The only way to know for sure if you are infected or not is to be tested.** Talk with a knowledgeable health care provider or counselor both before and after you are tested. You can go to your doctor or health department for testing or buy a home collection kit (for testing for HIV antibodies) at many pharmacies. To find out where to go in your area for HIV counseling and testing, call your local health department or the CDC National AIDS Hotline, at **1-800-342-AIDS (2437)**.

Your doctor or health care provider can give you a confidential HIV test. The information on your HIV test and test results are confidential, just as your other medical information. This means it can be shared only with people authorized to see your medical records. You can ask your doctor, health care provider, or HIV counselor at the place you are tested to explain who can obtain this information. For example, you may want to ask whether your insurance company could find out your HIV status if you make a claim for health insurance benefits or apply for life insurance or disability insurance.

In many states, you can be tested anonymously. These tests are usually given at special places known as anonymous testing sites. When you get an anonymous HIV test, the testing site records only a number or code with the test result, not your name. A counselor gives you this number at the time your blood, saliva, or urine is taken for the test, then you return to the testing site (or perhaps call the testing site, for example with home collection kits) and give them your number or code to learn the results of your test.

You are more likely to test positive for (be infected with) HIV if you:

- Have ever shared injection drug needles and syringes or "works."
- Have ever had sex without a condom with someone who had HIV.
- Have ever had a sexually transmitted disease, like chlamydia or gonorrhea.
- Received a blood transfusion or a blood clotting factor between 1978 and 1985.
- Have ever had sex with someone who has done any of those things

What can I do if the test shows I have HIV?

Although HIV is a very serious infection, many people with HIV and AIDS are living longer, healthier lives today, thanks to new and effective treatments. It is very important to make sure you have a doctor who knows how to treat HIV. If you don't know which doctor to use, talk with a health care professional or trained HIV counselor. If you are pregnant or are planning to become pregnant, this is especially important.

There also are other things you can do for yourself to stay healthy. Here are a few:

- Follow your doctor's instructions. Keep your appointments. Your doctor may prescribe medicine for you. Take the medicine just the way he or she tells you to because taking only some of your medicine gives your HIV infection more chance to grow.
- Get immunizations (shots) to prevent infections such as pneumonia and flu. Your doctor will tell you when to get these shots.
- If you smoke or if you use drugs not prescribed by your doctor, quit.
- Eat healthy foods. This will help keep you strong, keep your energy and weight up, and help your body protect itself.
- Exercise regularly to stay strong and fit.
- Get enough sleep and rest.

How can I find out more about HIV and AIDS?

Call the CDC National AIDS Hotline

1-800-342-2437 (English)

1-800-344-7432 (Spanish)

1-800-243-7889 (Deaf and Hard of Hearing)

www.cdc.gov