

Patient information from BMJ

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HIV: what is it?

HIV is a virus that harms the immune system and makes it harder for you to fight infections. But there are treatments that can help people with HIV stay healthy.

There are also simple things you can do to stop you getting the virus in the first place. And, if you are in a high-risk group, you should get tested regularly.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. If you are infected by the HIV virus it damages your immune system. This makes it harder to fight off some types of infection, and easier for some cancers to develop.

Without treatment, HIV infection can lead to AIDS. AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**.

AIDS is the name given to the group of infections and illnesses that develop as the HIV virus gradually weakens your immune system. Without treatment, AIDS usually develops between 6 and 9 years after infection with HIV.

HIV spreads in several ways. The most common ones are:

- through sexual contact
- infection passing from mother to baby, either in the womb or during birth
- during breastfeeding, and
- sharing infected needles and syringes when injecting 'street' drugs.

Myths and mistakes

When HIV was first known about in the early 1980s, there was no real treatment. In those first years, millions of people across the world developed AIDS and died.

But good treatments now mean that many people with HIV live fairly normal lives and don't die as early.

This is good news. But it also means that many people seem to think that HIV is no longer a problem and has 'gone away'. This is not true.

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- In 2019 there were nearly 700,000 HIV-related deaths worldwide.
- In the same year, 1.7 million people around the world were infected with HIV.
- In parts of Africa the number of people infected with HIV is still growing.

Many people still believe other things about HIV that aren't true. For example, some people still think that HIV mainly affects men who have sex with men, or people who inject illegal drugs.

But the most common way that HIV spreads now is through heterosexual or 'straight' sex (sex between men and women).

What are the symptoms?

Some of the symptoms of HIV infection can feel a bit like a bout of flu that doesn't go away. Symptoms that suggest HIV can include:

- fevers and night sweats
- tiredness
- feeling generally unwell
- sore throats and swollen glands in the throat
- weight loss
- skin rashes
- a fungal infection called candidiasis in the mouth
- canker sores
- diarrhoea
- headaches and muscle pain.

If your doctor thinks that you might have HIV, he or she will suggest that you have an HIV test.

Before the test, your doctor might ask you questions about your medical history and your lifestyle. This helps you and your doctor to understand whether it is likely that you have HIV.

For example, your doctor might ask about things that make people more likely to get HIV, such as:

- whether you inject illegal drugs
- your sex life: for example, how many sexual partners you have had recently, and whether you use condoms when you have sex
- whether (if you are a man) you have sex with other men
- whether any of your sexual partners have HIV
- any sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) you have had in the past, including hepatitis.

Your doctor might also want to examine you. This examination might include:

- checking your height and weight

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- checking your skin for rashes and signs of fungal infection
- looking inside your mouth to check for candidiasis
- listening to your heart and lungs
- checking your abdomen to see if your liver is swollen
- checking your genitals for signs of STDs.

Sometimes people ask for an HIV test for reasons other than having symptoms. For example, they might want a test:

- if they think they might have been infected through unprotected sex
- after an accidental needlestick injury (this sometimes happens to healthcare workers), or
- if they have been injecting drugs unsafely.

In most countries, all pregnant women are routinely tested for HIV.

If you have an HIV test your doctor should explain what might happen if the test is positive. For example, he or she should explain what treatment you might need to have, and how having HIV might affect your life.

You should feel free to ask your doctor any questions at any point.

What will happen?

It's not possible to say what will happen to individual people with HIV. As with all illnesses, some people do better than others.

But in most people the condition progresses slowly. This means that most people don't suddenly become more ill. It usually takes years.

And, with modern antiretroviral treatment (ART), the progress of the disease can be slowed almost to a standstill, so that you can live a pretty normal life.

ART gives the best results only when you take your medications exactly as prescribed. Your medical team should give you all the information you need about how to take your medications, and you should ask them anything you want, at any time.

Because of ART, people with HIV live much longer than they used to. In many countries, the average life expectancy of people who start ART at age 20 is now between 63 and 67 years old.

But HIV is still a serious illness that can cause lifelong difficulties for many people. People with HIV have an increased chance of certain other serious health problems, including heart disease, kidney disease, cancer, and some bone problems.

If you have HIV you should see your doctor regularly, and be aware of the symptoms of other problems that can happen.

For more information, see our leaflets *HIV: long-term complications* and *HIV: common infections in people with HIV*.

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Most people find that living well with HIV is easier if they have the support of the people closest to them. Talking about HIV with your loved ones can be an important part of staying well.

It's important that your sexual partners know that you have HIV. If you are anxious about telling them, talk to your doctor. Your doctor or another person (sometimes called a facilitator) might be able to help you talk to them, and to anyone else you are worried about telling.

Staying healthy when you have HIV doesn't just depend on taking your medications properly.

Good nutrition is crucial when you have an illness that affects your immune system. Talk to your doctor or nurse about how to eat well.

Practising safe sex helps to keep your sexual partners safe. That means using condoms, and educating yourself about other safe sex practices.

It's much easier to stay healthy with HIV when you **don't use drugs, drink alcohol, or smoke**. All these things can affect your immune system and make you weaker.

If you can't stop injecting drugs, talk to your treatment team about how to get clean needles and syringes. Your doctor might be able to help you get onto a drug treatment programme.

Many organisations and support groups offer help and information to people with HIV. Your doctor might be able to help you find support in your area, or you can easily search online.

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