

HIV/AIDS

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus which attacks the body's immune system making it susceptible to other infections or cancers. It can lead to the later stage of infection known as AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome).

Symptoms

Early HIV symptoms include a flu-like illness, similar to glandular fever, with swollen glands in the neck, armpits and groin, and headaches, fever and a rash. These symptoms are usually present within six weeks of infection.

After this there may be no further symptoms for years, but as the virus continues to attack the immune system people will develop signs of the HIV infection developing into AIDS. These signs include tiredness, weight loss, night sweats, swollen glands and diarrhoea, and can continue over a length of time.

When the immune system is severely damaged cancers and infections, such as pneumonia, can occur. This is then called AIDS.

How is it transmitted?

HIV can be transmitted through bodily fluids such as semen, blood and vaginal fluids. This means it can be passed on through unprotected sexual activity (vaginal, anal and oral), sharing needles and other drug injecting equipment, and the use of non-sterile tattooing and body piercing equipment. A woman with HIV can also pass it to her baby in the womb, at birth, or through breastfeeding.

You are more likely to catch HIV if there is broken skin or another genital infection is present when you have sex.

As HIV can't live outside the body for very long, you can't catch it from normal social contact such as hugging, kissing and shaking hands, nor can it be passed on through sharing kitchen utensils, drinking glasses, toilets, swimming pools or soap.

The risk of infection via a blood transmission in Australia is extremely low as all blood products are thoroughly screened.

How do I know if I have it?

HIV is detected by a blood test. As the test can give a negative result for up to three months after the initial infection, if there is a chance you have been infected the test will need to be repeated three months later.

Treatment/Management

There is no currently no cure or vaccine for HIV, and once a person is infected the virus stays in their body for life.

Drugs are available to help manage HIV and increase the time a person remains well. Antiviral drugs can help slow down the infection in its secondary stage. Drugs can improve the wellbeing of a person and the length of survival.

A world-wide effort is being made to search for new antiviral drugs and vaccines against HIV.

Early diagnosis and treatment can help prolong and maintain quality of life.

Prevention

Always use condoms and dams to reduce the risk of contracting HIV.

Never share needles, other injecting equipment or personal items such as razors or toothbrushes as they can carry traces of infected blood.

Practising safe sex reduces the risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmissible infections (STIs).

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For further information on sexual health visit the family planning website:
<http://www.fpwa-health.org.au>

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