

# 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).

While HIV and AIDS has been experienced in Australia on a much smaller scale than in many developing parts of the world, there are still a significant number of Australians who are HIV positive. People visiting places such as South East Asia or Africa should take extreme precautions if engaging in sexual activity.

## Symptoms

About half of people who become infected with HIV will develop 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, but can often be overlooked.

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 become worse over time.

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

## How is it transmitted?

### Sexual transmission

HIV can be transmitted through the exchange of body fluids such as semen, blood and vaginal fluids during unprotected sexual activity. You are more likely to catch HIV if there is broken skin or another genital infection is present when you have sex.

### Other methods of transmission

HIV can also be passed on through 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. Unprotected anal sex has a high risk of HIV transmission.

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. Contrary to popular belief, needle-stick injuries outside a hospital setting carry a low-risk of HIV transmission.

The risk of infection via a blood transmission in Australia is also 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. It is important to get tested as soon as possible if you think you may have been exposed to HIV.

If you decide to get tested it's important to go to someone who has expertise in the area – you can see an FPWA clinician, or ask the WA AIDS Council (9482 0000) to provide you with information on practitioners in your area.

Having a HIV test can be quite daunting. You may find it useful to talk about it with someone first, such as a counsellor. Post-test counselling is also available. **For more information about STI testing go to [www.fpwa.org.au/healthinformation/information sheets/stitests/](http://www.fpwa.org.au/healthinformation/information sheets/stitests/)**

## Treatment/Management

There is currently no cure or vaccine for HIV, and once a person is infected the virus stays in their body for life. However, antiviral drugs are available to help manage HIV and increase the time a person remains well, enabling people who are infected to live a more normal life, including having healthy children. Having a healthy lifestyle, including eating well, exercising and reducing stress, also help people with HIV to continue feeling well.

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

Using condoms and dams reduces the risk of contracting HIV (a dam is a thin latex square held over the vaginal or anal area during oral sex). They stop body fluids like semen, blood and vaginal fluids from being exchanged. For more information about condoms and dams go to [www.fpwa.org.au/healthinformation/information sheets/](http://www.fpwa.org.au/healthinformation/information sheets/)

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

**For more information about HIV/AIDS contact the Sexual Health Helpline on 9227 6178 or 1800 198 205 (country callers) or email [sexhelp@fpwa.org.au](mailto:sexhelp@fpwa.org.au)**

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



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