

HIV Infection

Fact Sheet

What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Infection with HIV damages the body's immune system, which makes it more difficult to fight off infections and some cancer.

More than 70 million people have been infected with HIV and about 35 million have died from HIV worldwide. HIV is a serious infection; however effective treatment has been developed and people with HIV infection who take treatment daily can lead a full and long life.

Is HIV and AIDS the same thing?

NO; AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is a late stage of HIV infection. AIDS is diagnosed when a person with HIV infection has a severely damaged immune system so that they develop a disease caused by an organism that doesn't usually affect healthy people. AIDS is also present if a person with HIV infection develops certain kinds of cancers. People with HIV infection who are on effective treatment do not develop AIDS, as the treatment stops damage to the immune system.

How did I acquire HIV?

HIV is spread when infected body fluids (blood, semen, breast milk or vaginal fluid) come in contact with the blood stream of another person. This can occur:

- During anal or vaginal sex without the protection of a condom
- By sharing drug injecting equipment (contaminated needles, syringes and other injecting equipment and drug solutions)
- By unsafe injections, tattoos and other procedures that involve unsterile cutting or piercing
- From mother to baby during pregnancy, childbirth, or breast-feeding

HIV is NOT transmitted by casual contact such as hugging, or holding hands, kissing on the cheek, sharing food, sharing eating utensils, or eating food prepared by someone with HIV, through toilet seats, or by mosquito or other insect bites.

Who is at risk from HIV?

The highest risk groups for **becoming infected with HIV** include:

- Men who have sex with men, without a condom
- People who have sex with people from countries with a high rate of HIV infection
- People who use injectable drugs
- People who have had tattoos or other piercings using unsterile equipment, especially overseas
- People who have sex with a person with a high risk of HIV as listed here

People can be infected with several different sexually transmitted infections (STIs) at the same time. Having sexually transmissible infection (STI) makes it easier to also pick up HIV infection. And if someone is HIV positive, having another STI makes them more likely to pass on HIV to sexual partners.

Can HIV be prevented?

HIV infection can be prevented by:

- Using condoms every time for anal and vaginal sex
- Never sharing needles, syringes, or other injecting equipment
- Avoiding getting tattooed or having a body piercing done unless you are sure that sterile equipment is being used
- Taking Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) – PrEP is a HIV prevention option for people who don't have HIV but who are at high risk of becoming infected with HIV. PrEP contains two antiretroviral medicines that are also used to treat people who already have HIV infection. Condoms should still be used, even if taking PrEP

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- A person with HIV infection taking antiretroviral treatment – Antiretroviral medication taken by a HIV positive woman during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding is used to help prevent the spread of HIV from a woman to her baby. Antiretroviral treatment, if taken properly so that the level of the virus in the blood of the person with HIV is very low, helps prevent the spread of HIV to sexual partners

How will my care change whilst in hospital?

- Regular and thorough hand hygiene is one of the most successful ways to prevent the spread of **ALL** infections
- The hospital staff will wear protective apparel such as gloves and an apron or gown when they anticipate contact with blood and/or bodily fluids

Good Hand Hygiene Practices

Hand Hygiene is the most effective way to prevent **ALL** infections, including the flu and the common cold. Encourage your family and friends to learn and maintain good hand hygiene practices every day.

Please refer to the hand hygiene information in the patient information booklet or hand hygiene leaflet available from the Infection Prevention and Control team.

Alternative - Alcohol based hand rub/gel

During your stay in hospital, you may have seen the staff using an alcohol-based hand rub, as an alternative to soap and water. Alcohol-based hand rubs or gels can be used for hand hygiene as long as your hands are not visibly soiled/dirty. There is a variety of brands on the market and available for purchase at most pharmacies. You may choose to

use this type of product at home.

Can I still have visitors?

Yes – you can still have visitors. **Casual contact such as hugging and kissing is OK.** If a friend or relative has had recent surgery, currently have an illness, or has a compromised immune system they may wish to contact the Infection Prevention and Control team or speak with their GP for further advice. We ask that you also encourage your visitors to perform hand hygiene before and after they enter your room. They can use either soap and water at the wall sink in the ward, or the alcohol-based hand rub provided outside your room.

What happens when I go home?

- It is important that anyone assisting you with close personal care wears gloves if they are going to be in contact with any wounds, blood, urine, or faeces. They must wash their hands well, after removing their gloves and disposing of the gloves immediately in the rubbish bin.
- If you have HIV, it is important to tell people who may have been exposed, so that they can get tested and vaccinated. Your doctor or sexual health clinic can help you identify people who may be at risk and help contact them. If you wish, your doctor can make the contact for you, while also keeping your identity confidential.

What is the public health response?

Doctors, hospitals, and laboratories must notify new cases of HIV to the local Public Health Unit. This information is kept confidential and is used to control further spread and better understand who is at risk of the disease.

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Where can I get further information?

You can talk to your doctor or the nursing staff. If you wish to speak with the Infection Prevention and Control team, ask your nurse to contact the Infection Prevention and Control Office. Our office hours are 8am to 4pm Monday to Friday. Our contact numbers are (02) 9480 9433 or (02) 9480 9732.

Alternatively,

- **Contact the Local Public Health Unit
1300 066 055**
- **Contact the Hepatitis Infoline (02) 9332
1599 or 1800 803 990 (outside Sydney)**
- **NSW Sexual Health Infoline 1800 451
624**

References

NSW Dept of Health; Communicable Diseases Factsheets – HIV Infection (26 October 2017)

Australian Government Department of Health, Canberra; Communicable Disease for Consumers – Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (3 December 2014)

Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC); HIV – HIV Basic Information (1 June 2021)

National Health and Medical Research Council; Australian Guidelines for the Prevention and Control of Infection in Healthcare (2019)

NSW Dept of Health; Infection Prevention and Control Policy PD2017_013