

PART
6

CHECK YOUR FACTS

WHAT IS HIV?

The letters **HIV** stand for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. Viruses are the smallest of all disease-causing organisms. HIV only infects human beings, and attacks the body's immune system. Sometimes HIV is called the **AIDS virus**, because being infected with HIV can lead to **AIDS**. But having HIV infection is not the same as having **AIDS**.

HOW DOES HIV AFFECT THE BODY?

The virus destroys a type of white blood cell. These white blood cells have an important role in the immune system which protects the body against illnesses. Soon after being infected, some people may suffer flu-like symptoms for a few weeks. Otherwise there are no signs of early HIV infection. A person infected with HIV (or who has **AIDS**) can pass on the virus to someone else.

Once infected, a person is infected for life and there is no cure, either with traditional or western medicine. Some people remain healthy for many months or years, depending on their access to treatments, and good nutrition and lifestyle.

Eventually HIV destroys the person's immune system, which makes them very vulnerable to a range of illnesses. These can develop from within a few months to over 10 years after the person is infected.

WHAT IS AIDS?

AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**.

Getting (**acquiring**) HIV infection leads to a **weakened (deficient) immune** system. This makes a person with HIV vulnerable to a particular group of illnesses (**syndrome**). A healthy person without the virus is less likely to be affected by these illnesses, which are called opportunistic infections. They include rare cancers, and eye, skin and nervous system conditions, as well as TB and diarrhoea. Many are curable, such as TB.

WHAT IS THE HIV TEST?

The HIV test detects whether a person's blood has developed antibodies to HIV. Although the test does not detect the virus itself, having antibodies to HIV means that the person is HIV-infected (antibody positive, seropositive or HIV positive).

If there are no antibodies, the person is antibody negative (seronegative or HIV negative). The test result is often negative if the person has been infected only recently, because it can take up to three months from the time of infection for the antibodies to develop. This is called the 'window period'.

HIV testing is therefore not an effective prevention method. It should always be accompanied by pre- and post-test counselling, and should never be carried out without the person's informed consent.

HOW DO YOU GET INFECTED WITH HIV?

HIV is found in an infected person's body fluids, mainly in blood (including menstrual blood), breastmilk, semen and vaginal secretions.

- ◆ **Sexual transmission** happens when HIV passes from someone's infected semen, blood or vaginal secretions directly into another person's bloodstream during sexual intercourse, often through the mucous membranes lining the inside of the vagina, penis or rectum.
- ◆ HIV is also transmitted **by HIV-infected blood transfusions or contaminated injecting equipment or cutting instruments**.
- ◆ There is a risk of transmission from an infected **mother to her baby**, during pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding. About a third of all babies born to mothers with HIV become infected themselves.

HOW IS HIV NOT TRANSMITTED?

The virus can survive only in body fluids inside a living human body. Once blood and other body fluids are outside the body, HIV survives for just a few hours. HIV cannot pass through unbroken skin.

Very small amounts of the virus have been found in saliva, tears, vomit, faeces and urine, but these fluids do not transmit infection. HIV has not been found in, and is not transmitted by, sweat.

HIV is **not spread** through:

- ◆ casual contact
- ◆ touching someone who is infected, or something they have used
- ◆ sharing eating or drinking utensils
- ◆ using the same toilet seats or washing water as an infected person
- ◆ mosquitoes or other blood-sucking insects.

Most insects do not pass blood from one person to another when they bite humans. The malaria parasite enters the bloodstream in mosquito saliva, not blood.

WHAT IS UNSAFE OR HIGH RISK BEHAVIOUR?

This means doing something that involves a high risk of infection for you or someone else. Most people do not know who has HIV and who does not. This means that the following activities are always risky:

- ◆ Having **penetrative vaginal or anal sex** (where the penis enters the vagina or anus) **without using a condom**.
This is called unprotected sex. The more partners you have unprotected sex with, the higher the risk of infection.
The risk of transmission from a man to a woman is higher than from a woman to a man. Unprotected anal sex between men, or between a man and a woman, is as risky as unprotected vaginal sex.
- ◆ Using **unsterilised needles and syringes, or cutting instruments**, on yourself or someone else, that have been used and are likely to be contaminated by another person's blood.
- ◆ Receiving an **infected blood transfusion**.

People from all social backgrounds are vulnerable to or living with HIV. It is not who you are, but what you do that puts you at risk.

However, some people are more at risk than others – they are more vulnerable because of their position in society. Women in particular often have less choice about sex.

Sex workers or prostitutes are often blamed for HIV. However, it is important to remember that prostitution exists because men are willing to pay women or other men for this service. People who exchange sex for money or food do so for many different reasons.

WHAT IS SAFER SEX?

Safer sex is any sexual activity which does not involve a high risk of transmitting HIV. It therefore means:

- ◆ having vaginal or anal sex using a condom
- ◆ other forms of sexual activity, including masturbation with a partner, thigh sex, stroking, massage and kissing.

Oral sex may involve some risk, but is safer than unprotected sexual intercourse. Safer sex also means having sex that is pleasurable for both partners, without risk of unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections, and without pressure, force or abuse. It also means ensuring safer conception and pregnancy when wanted.

WHAT IS AN STD OR AN STI?

Sexually transmitted diseases or infections are spread through unprotected vaginal or anal intercourse and include gonorrhoea, chlamydia, syphilis, chancroid, genital herpes, hepatitis B and HIV. Having an STI also increases the risk of HIV infection.

Many STIs are caused by bacteria and can be easily cured with antibiotics. Untreated infections can cause serious health problems such as infertility, or heart and brain damage. Some infections can be passed from mother to child before or during birth, and cause serious problems for the baby. STIs are common. If you suspect that you have an infection, visit a doctor or health centre, and encourage your partner to have a check-up.

Symptoms include:

- ◆ abnormal discharge from the penis, anus or vagina
- ◆ pain during sex or while urinating
- ◆ pain in the stomach or groin area with fever
- ◆ rashes, blisters or sores on the genitals.

Women are less likely to have obvious symptoms.

HOW DO YOU USE A CONDOM?

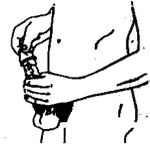
Condoms prevent pregnancy and HIV/STI transmission, if they are used correctly. It helps to practise using a condom on a model penis or vegetable.

- 1 Discuss and agree to use a condom for vaginal or anal sexual intercourse, and check the expiry date on the condom package.

- 2 Tear open the package carefully, and take out the condom.



- 3 Place the condom on the tip of the penis when it is hard and erect, but before it touches the partner's genitals. Make sure that the rolled-up condom rim faces outwards.



- 4 Using the other hand, pinch the tip of the condom to remove any trapped air, and unroll the condom to cover the penis.



- 5 After intercourse, withdraw the penis carefully, but before it becomes soft. Hold the rim of the condom against the penis, so that semen does not spill out.



- 6 Slide the condom gently off the penis, and knot the open end.



- 7 Safely dispose of the used condom.



Lubrication during intercourse helps to prevent condom breakage. Some condoms are lubricated already. If lubrication is not possible or sufficient, spermicides or water-based lubricants such as glycerine should be used. Oil-based lubricants such as vaseline or butter should never be used, because they damage condoms. If a condom breaks during sex, it should be taken off immediately, and a new one put on.