

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 and disease. There is no cure for HIV but there are treatments that weaken the virus and help people who are infected stay healthy.

What is HIV?

HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. Infection with the virus damages your immune system and makes it harder to fight off some types of infection. It also makes it easier for some conditions and 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 HIV gradually weakens your immune system. Without treatment, AIDS usually develops over 10 to 15 years after infection with HIV.

The most common ways people can become infected with HIV are:

- Through sexual contact without a condom
- Infection passing from mother to baby, either in the womb or during birth or breastfeeding, and
- Sharing infected needles and syringes when injecting 'street' drugs.

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. You may experience this in the first few weeks after you've been infected with the virus. These symptoms can then disappear for several years as your body tries to manage the infection. This is why many people with HIV won't even know they've been infected. But the longer you go without treatment, the more likely symptoms will return as your immune system gets even weaker.

Symptoms that suggest HIV can include:

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- 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, they 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 how likely it is 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 infections (STIs) 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
- 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 STIs.

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, pregnant women are routinely tested for HIV.

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If you have an HIV test your doctor should explain what might happen if the test is positive. For example, they should explain what treatment you might need, and how having HIV might affect your life. Your doctor will be able to answer any questions you have.

What will happen?

It's not possible to say what will happen to individual people with HIV.

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

And, with modern antiretroviral treatment (ART), the progress of the disease can be slowed almost to a standstill, so that most people can live a long and healthy life. This is because it weakens the virus to the point where it can no longer be picked up on a blood test (called an undetectable viral load).

But ART gives the best results only when you take your medications exactly as prescribed. Your medical team will give you the information you need about how to take your medicines.

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.^[1]

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*.

Support and lifestyle advice

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.

Practicing safe sex helps to keep your sexual partners safe. That means using condoms, and educating yourself about other safe sex practices. However, studies have shown that people taking ART as prescribed and who have an undetectable viral load, do not pass on HIV to their partners through sex. You should talk to your doctor about what is safest for you and your partner before you make any decisions.

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

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Good nutrition is crucial when you have an illness that affects your immune system.

It's also 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. For example, in the UK, the Terrence Higgins Trust (tth.org.uk) has been providing these services for many years. Your doctor might be able to help you find support in your area, or you can search online.

References

1. Antiretroviral Therapy Cohort Collaboration. Survival of HIV-positive patients starting antiretroviral therapy between 1996 and 2013: a collaborative analysis of cohort studies. *Lancet HIV*. 2017 May 10;4(8):e349-e356.

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