

H I V A N D A I D S

WHAT ARE HIV AND AIDS?

Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) is caused by infection with HIV (human immunodeficiency virus). AIDS occurs some time (often years) after an infection with HIV.

AIDS includes a number of illnesses that a person can develop because his or her immune system is weakened by HIV infection. The more common of these are: pneumocystis pneumonia, Kaposi's sarcoma, cytomegalovirus infection, tuberculosis, oesophageal candidiasis, cryptococcosis, cryptosporidiosis, and HIV encephalopathy.

HIV destroys a type of blood cell (CD4+ or helper T cells). These cells help the immune system fight infections and cancers.

HIV and AIDS were first identified in the early 1980s in the United States and soon after in Australia. Several hundred new infections of HIV occur in NSW each year. While the epidemics are stabilising in western countries, they are uncontrolled in many poor countries, particularly countries in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia.

HOW IS HIV SPREAD?

HIV is present in blood and other body fluids including semen, vaginal fluid, and breast milk. A person who comes into contact with the blood or body fluids of a person infected with HIV may be at risk of infection. HIV can be passed on from one person to another through:

- unprotected sex (anal and vaginal intercourse);
- shared injecting equipment;
- pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding (from mother to child);
- contaminated blood or blood products;
- contaminated piercing and medical equipment used on the body.

In Australia, screening of donated blood and blood products has protected the blood supply since 1985. Medical equipment is sterilised or disinfected before use.

HIV is not spread through casual contact at school, home, or the work place. HIV is not transmitted through air or water, sharing cups or cutlery, touching, kissing or hugging, or through bites of mosquitoes and other insects.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A person infected with HIV may initially develop a mild illness (known as a seroconversion illness) consisting of

muscle aches, low grade fever, headaches, and sometimes a rash. Swelling of the lymph glands may also occur. This flu-like illness usually subsides within a few weeks. Most people infected are then free of any symptoms for many years until they develop AIDS. When a person develops AIDS, symptoms may include a loss of appetite, diarrhoea, weight loss, fever, lethargy, fatigue, or the specific symptoms of a number of illnesses that define AIDS.

HOW IS HIV DIAGNOSED?

The only way to know whether you are infected is to be tested for HIV infection. The test is a simple blood test for HIV antibodies that can be done by your doctor. Tests can also detect the virus in the blood, and other tests are used to monitor the amount of HIV in the blood (that is, the viral load). Other special tests are usually required to diagnose an AIDS-defining illness.

HOW ARE HIV AND AIDS TREATED?

There have been major breakthroughs in treating HIV and AIDS. Most people with HIV infection in Australia are treated with drugs known as antiretrovirals. These drugs are important for slowing down the effect of HIV on the immune system. Other treatments can prevent or cure some of the illnesses associated with AIDS. However, these treatments do not cure HIV. The early diagnosis of HIV infection allows more options for treatment and prevention.

HOW IS HIV PREVENTED?

To avoid coming into contact with HIV:

- practise safe sex. Use a condom and a water-based lubricant each time you have vaginal or anal intercourse;
- use sterile equipment if you inject drugs. Do not share needles, syringes, filters, spoons, swabs, or tourniquets;
- dispose of used injecting equipment in a Fitpack® or other approved containers for sharps. Containers can be collected and returned to a Needle Syringe Program (NSP) outlet or selected pharmacies (contact the Alcohol and Drug Information Service on the number listed below). You can also contact your local council for information about disposal in your area;
- use disposable impermeable gloves when cleaning up blood spills or giving first aid;
- wipe any blood spills with an absorbent paper towel and use detergent and water to clean up the site of the spill;

- cover any sores and cuts or wounds with a waterproof dressing;
- make sure that body piercing and tattooing is only done at shops that use new disposable equipment for each customer and proper methods of sterilisation.

IF YOU HAVE HIV

Do not donate blood, organs or other tissues.

You must tell your partner if you are infected with a sexually transmissible infection (including HIV) before sex and always engage in safe sex.

IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO HIV

After contact with the virus, taking special HIV drugs may prevent infection. If you believe you have had a high-risk

exposure, you can call 1800 737 669 for advice as soon as possible after the exposure.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

- AIDS Council of New South Wales (ACON) Telephone 9206 2000
- NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) Telephone 9557 1476
- NSW HIV–AIDS Information Line 93324000 Free call 1800 451600
- Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) 9361 8000 (Sydney Metropolitan) 1800 422599 (other NSW residents)
- Your local sexual health clinic (look under S in the White Pages).

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COMMUNICABLE DISEASES REPORT, JUNE 2002

TRENDS

Notifications of communicable disease through to April were largely within seasonal expectations. Cases of **cryptosporidiosis**, **pertussis**, and **shigellosis** appear to be declining.