



# HIV/AIDS

## Fact Sheet

### What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV stands for the Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This is the virus that leads to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). HIV weakens the immune system, making it more difficult for the body to fight off infections. HIV only lives for a very short time outside the body. In order for you to be infected, the virus must enter your bloodstream.

### How is it Spread?

HIV can be spread through ...

- vaginal or anal sex without a condom, or oral sex without a condom or dental dam
- sharing sex toys
- sharing needles or equipment for using drugs
- sharing needles used for piercing, acupuncture or tattooing
- pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding (from an HIV positive mother to her baby)
- a needlestick injury or exposure to body fluids.

### What are the symptoms?

Early symptoms:

“Flu-like” symptoms can occur when the immune system is creating the first antibodies to try to fight the HIV infection.

These symptoms are usually felt in the first 2 to 4 weeks after being infected, and may include:

- fever
- fatigue
- muscle pain
- night sweats
- diarrhea
- skin rash
- headache
- sore throat.

Symptoms can last less than 2 weeks or as long as 10 weeks.

HIV is not spread by ...

- everyday, non-sexual contact with people
- hand shakes, hugs or kisses
- coughs or sneezes
- giving blood
- swimming pools
- toilet seats
- water fountains
- sharing eating utensils or food
- insect or animal bites.

Later symptoms:

Having AIDS means that someone with HIV has become sick with a life-threatening illness or infection.

If someone is not treated for HIV, the following may occur:

- fatigue
- weight loss
- fever or night sweats
- joint and/or muscle pain
- skin rashes and lesions
- diarrhea
- swollen glands
- yeast infections
- pneumonia
- cancers

*Continued...*

### **How can you get tested for HIV?**

Once HIV has entered your blood your immune system will take 4 to 14 weeks to make antibodies to try to fight it. Since the blood test is checking to see if the antibodies are in your blood, a blood test done three months after you have taken a risk will be very accurate. You can visit your health care provider, walk-in clinic, or Public Health's Sexual Health Clinic for HIV testing.

### **How is it treated?**

Advances in treatment have helped prolong the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS and improve their quality of life. Although there are treatments, there is still no cure for HIV.

### **What about sexual partners?**

If you are diagnosed with HIV, everyone that you had sex with or shared a needle with needs to be advised that they need to be tested. Public Health can help with this. Public Health always keeps your name confidential.

### **How can you protect yourself?**

The HIV/AIDS virus can be transmitted from body to body through blood, semen, pre-ejaculate, vaginal secretions, rectal secretions and breast milk. There are several steps you can take to reduce your risk of HIV infection:

- Always use a latex or polyurethane condom or dental dam (for oral sex on a female) to make sexual activity safer.
- Abstain from higher risk sexual activities like anal sex, and reduce your number of partners.
- Ask your partner to be tested for HIV and other STIs before you have sex.
- Never share needles or other drug use equipment. Use the Needle Exchange Program (NEP). You can check [hpePublicHealth.ca](http://hpePublicHealth.ca) or call the NEP Line (613-966-5513 ext. 620) to find locations.
- If you are getting a tattoo, body piercing or acupuncture, ensure that all equipment is sterile.
- If you are pregnant, have an HIV test. If your test is positive for HIV, you can take medication to greatly reduce the chance your baby will be infected.
- If you have done something that has put you at risk, get tested.
- If you have had a needle-stick injury, exposure to body fluids or have been sexually assaulted, seek medical care right away. You may be prescribed medication to help prevent you from getting HIV.

### **Other Questions?**

- Call the AIDS and Sexual Health Information Line 1-800-668-2437.
- Talk to your health care provider or call our Communicable Disease Program at 613-966-5500 or 1-800-267-2803, ext. 349. | TTY Dial 711 (1-800-267-6511) | [hpePublicHealth.ca](http://hpePublicHealth.ca)
- Contact CATIE (Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange) at [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

### **References**

- Content adapted from Health Canada – It's Your Health – HIV/AIDS  
<http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/hl-vs/iyh-vsv/diseases-maladies/hiv-vih-eng.php>
- Carol Major, Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion, Toronto Public Health Lab, HIV Testing Conference, 2010.
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- HIV & AIDS Basic Facts, 2010, CATIE

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