

HIV and AIDS

What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is a virus which reduces the body's ability to fight infection.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome and is the term used for infections and illnesses which occur due to a weakened immune system in people living with HIV. Without treatment AIDS can occur several years after infection with HIV. Due to treatments for HIV we rarely see cases of AIDS in Australia.

How does someone become infected with HIV?

HIV can be transmitted by:

- vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- sharing drug injecting equipment
- blood contact into the skin via piercings and tattoos with equipment that is not sterilised properly
- pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding if the mother has HIV and has not received treatment
- sharps or needlestick injuries (e.g. in healthcare settings)

HIV is rarely transmitted by:

- vaginal or anal sex if condoms have been used
- oral sex without a condom
- skin splashes with HIV infected body fluids

HIV has never been reported as being transmitted by:

- shaking hands or social contact including kissing and cuddling
- sharing cutlery or crockery
- toilet seats
- mosquito bites

What is a HIV test?

It is a blood test which detects if HIV *antigens and antibodies* are present. Antigens are parts of the virus and antibodies are produced by the human body in response to infection. If you are infected with HIV, then HIV antigens and antibodies will be present in your blood.

What does a positive HIV test result mean?

A positive test means that you *may* be infected with HIV. A positive test is followed by further testing to confirm infection.

What does a negative HIV test result mean?

It means either that you have **not** been infected with HIV or you **have** been infected with HIV but antigens or antibodies are not yet detected. HIV tests can take 3 months from possible exposure to be accurate. This is called the 'window period'.

What does an indeterminate HIV test result mean?

Sometimes a result is neither positive nor negative. Additional testing is needed to confirm or exclude infection.

What is HIV rapid testing?

Rapid tests for HIV can provide results within 30 minutes; however positive rapid test results need to be confirmed by further laboratory tests. Rapid tests are available through some general practitioners and sexual health clinics in Australia.

Is there treatment for HIV?

Yes. HIV treatment involves taking tablets daily to reduce the amount of the HIV virus in the body. HIV treatments dramatically improve the duration and quality of life for people with HIV.

What are the advantages of having an HIV test?

Many new HIV transmissions occur because people are not aware they have HIV. That is because it can take years before HIV symptoms are noticeable. Testing regularly allows you to protect your health and the health of your sexual partners.

Things to consider before testing:

- receiving a positive HIV result can be traumatic but support and counselling are readily available
- people with HIV may experience discrimination
- insurance and visas for some countries are restricted for people infected with HIV
- there are legal requirements regarding sex in some Australian states and territories for people with HIV.

Staff at the AIDS Action Council are able to talk about having a HIV test and can be contacted on 02 6257 2855 or via <http://aidsaction.org.au/>

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