



HIV and AIDS

What is Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS)?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that affects the body's immune system and reduces the body's ability to fight infection.

Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is caused by HIV and is a term used for various infections and illnesses which can happen due to a weakened immune system in people living with HIV.

AIDS may occur many years after HIV infection and with the available HIV treatments we rarely see cases of AIDS in Australia. Not all people living with HIV will be affected by AIDS.

How does someone become infected with HIV?

HIV can be transmitted from an infected person to a non-infected person by:

- vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- sharing drug injecting equipment
- blood contact into the skin through piercings and tattoos with equipment that is not sterilised properly
- from mother to child during birth or breastfeeding without having HIV treated
- sharps or needlestick injuries

HIV is *rarely* transmitted by:

- vaginal or anal sex if condoms have been used
- oral sex without a condom
- splashes to the skin 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 checks if you have HIV antigens and antibodies in your blood. Antigens are parts of the virus and antibodies are produced by your body in response to infection. If you are infected with HIV, you will have these antigens and antibodies 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 more testing to confirm whether you have HIV.



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What does a negative HIV test result mean?

It means either that you have not been infected with HIV or that you have been infected with HIV, but antigens or antibodies are not yet detected. It can take 3 months from the time you were exposed to HIV for the test to be accurate. This is called the 'window period', you may need another blood test in 3 months. Your clinician will provide advice on this.

What does an indeterminate HIV test result mean?

Sometimes a result is not positive or negative. More testing is needed to confirm whether you have HIV.

What is HIV rapid testing?

Rapid tests for HIV can provide results within 30 minutes. Positive rapid test results are then confirmed by more laboratory tests. Rapid tests are available through some GPs and sexual health clinics in Australia.

Is there treatment for HIV?

HIV is not curable but is managed with treatment. HIV treatment involves taking tablets every day to reduce the amount of the HIV virus in your body. HIV treatments dramatically improve the length and quality of life for people with HIV.

What are the advantages of having an HIV test?

Many people get HIV from someone who doesn't know they have the virus. That is because it can take years before HIV symptoms are noticeable. Regular testing protects your health and the health of others.

Other important information to consider:

- Receiving a positive HIV result can be upsetting and is sometimes associated with stigma or shame. There is support and counselling readily available that can help you through this time.
- Insurance and visas for some countries are restricted for people infected with HIV and it is important to know these if you travel.
- There are legal requirements around sex in some Australian states and territories for people with HIV.

Meridian is a support organisation for people living with or impacted by HIV and AIDS in the Canberra region. Staff at Meridian can talk with you about having a HIV test or provide support and advocacy for those living with HIV. You can contact them on (02) 6257 2855 or visit <https://meridianact.org.au/>

If you need more information or have any questions, please contact the Canberra Sexual Health Clinic on (02) 5124 2184.



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References:

Victorian Sexual Health Network (2020) HIV <https://www.staystifree.org.au/get-the-facts/hiv>

NSW STI Programs Unit (2018) HIV and AIDS Factsheet. <https://stipu.nsw.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/10.-HIV-and-AIDS.pdf>

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