

HIV, the basics

What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus, the virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). HIV is a disease that slowly damages the body's immune system. Without a strong, healthy immune system, the body becomes susceptible to many infections and illnesses. Over time, a person living with HIV that is not taking HIV medication is more susceptible to get sick, and develop AIDS defining illnesses.

Who it as risk?

Anyone can get HIV. HIV does not discriminate between age, race, or sexual orientation (heterosexual, bisexual or homosexual). It is what a person DOES (risk behavior), and not what a person *is* that increase the risk of getting HIV.

How HIV is transmitted?

In order to understand HIV transmission, you need to know the following two facts: 1) the potential body fluids infected with HIV and 2) the routes of transmission. HIV is present in blood, semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk. Although small amounts of HIV have been found in body fluids like saliva, feces, urine, and tears, there is no evidence that HIV can spread through these body fluids. Secondly, HIV is transmitted in the following ways:

- Having unprotected sexual intercourse: bodily fluids, blood, semen, and vaginal secretions infected with HIV can be pass during sexual contact. Saliva is not considered potential fluid infected with HIV.
- By sharing needles to inject drugs. Infected blood can be exchanged between individuals who are using the same needle and syringe.
- By accidental needle sticks (needles contaminated with HIV infected blood).
- Through the transfusion of infected blood or blood products (because of new and improved blood screening tools, this has rarely occurred since 1992).
- During pregnancy, HIV positive woman can pass HIV to their babies while being pregnant, during delivery, or when breast-feeding.

Contrary to public perception, you can't get HIV by drinking from a water fountain, sitting on a toilet seat, hugging or touching someone living with HIV, or by eating off plates and utensils, sharing items such as cups or pencils, or coughing or sneezing. HIV is not spread through routine contact in restaurants, workplaces, or schools. I hope this demystify the risk of getting HIV.

The relationship between HIV and other sexual transmitted diseases (STDs)

Studies have shown that the presence of other sexual transmitted diseases (STDs) increases the risk of getting HIV. HIV and other STDs are linked in the following ways:

- 1) Similar behaviors put people at risk for both HIV and other STDs;

Sexually transmitted diseases (gonorrhea, chlamydia, herpes, syphilis, genital wart) are transmitted by the same risk behaviors known to transmit HIV, through unprotected vaginal, anal and much less often through oral sex.

2) The presence of an STD increases the risk of getting HIV

Studies confirmed that persons are 2-5 times more likely to become infected with HIV when other STDs are present. For example, herpes, syphilis or chancroid lesions may result in breaks in the skin on or in the anus, vagina, or penis that permit HIV to enter the bloodstream more easily. .

3) HIV positive individuals co-infected with another STD can more efficiently transmit HIV to sexual partners.

Shedding of HIV is known to occur more often and in higher concentrations from those with STDs than from those without STDs. This increased shedding of HIV increases the amount of HIV present in the genital tract and thus makes HIV transmission to sexual partners more efficient.

How to prevent the spread of HIV

HIV is preventable. Be aware of body fluids infected with HIV and its routes of transmission. Getting up-to-date information is the first step toward protecting yourself.

- Reduce the number of sexual partners and talk about safe sex practices.
- Learn how to use latex condom appropriately and consistently while having oral, anal or vaginal sexual encounter.
- Do not share contaminated needles or syringes with other people.
- Don't drink or use drugs before having sex; both impair your judgement to practice safe sex.
- HIV positive pregnant women should receive special prenatal care from a gynecologist specialize in HIV during their pregnancy. In addition, it is recommended that HIV positive women should not breast feed.
- The prompt diagnosis and treatment of all suspected STDs.
- Learn to recognize the symptoms and consequences of the most common STDs.

For More Information on HIV:

The National AIDS Hotline: (800) 342-2437

The CDC National STD Hotline: 1-800-227-8922.

NYC HIV/AIDS Hotline (English & Spanish): 1-800-TALKHIV(825-5448)

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