



HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV)

What is Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)?

Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the virus that causes Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). This virus is passed from one person to another through blood-to-blood and sexual contact. Infected pregnant women can pass HIV to their baby during pregnancy or delivery, as well as through breastfeeding. People with HIV have what is called HIV infection. A positive HIV test result does not mean that a person has AIDS.

How do people get HIV?

HIV is spread by sexual contact with an infected person, by sharing needles and/or syringes (primarily for drug injection) with someone who is infected, or, less commonly (and now very rarely in countries where blood is screened for HIV antibodies), through transfusions of infected blood or blood clotting factors. Babies born to HIV-infected women may become infected before or during birth or through breast-feeding after birth.

These body fluids have been proven to spread HIV: blood, semen, vaginal fluid, breast milk, cerebrospinal fluid surrounding the brain and the spinal cord, synovial fluid surrounding bone joints; and amniotic fluid surrounding a fetus.

What are the signs and symptoms of HIV?

People in the early stages of HIV infection present with a series of warning signs: fever, swollen glands, sore throat, night sweats and unexplained rash that can persist anywhere from a few days to several months. As the disease gradually progresses, a person may develop yeast infections in their mouth and throats. These opportunistic infections take advantage of the body's weakened immune system associated with the progression of the disease.

How is HIV diagnosed?

HIV infection is usually diagnosed by tests for antibodies against HIV-1. Some combination tests also detect antibodies against HIV-2 (i.e., HIV-1/2). Antibody testing begins with a sensitive screening test (e.g., the enzyme immunoassay [EIA] or rapid test). The advent of HIV rapid testing has enabled clinicians to make a substantially accurate presumptive diagnosis of HIV-1 infection within half an hour. Reactive screening tests must be confirmed by a supplemental test (e.g., the Western blot [WB]) or an immune-fluorescence assay (IFA). If confirmed by a supplemental test, a positive antibody test result indicates that a person is infected with HIV and is capable of transmitting the virus to others.



Frequently Asked Questions

How is HIV treated?

There are many treatments that can help people with HIV. Currently, medicines can slow the growth of the virus or stop it from making copies of itself. Although these drugs don't kill the virus, they keep the amount of virus in the blood low. The amount of virus in the blood is called the viral load, and it can be measured by a test. The lower the viral load, the longer a person can stay healthy and fight off infections.

How can people protect themselves against infection?

Because no vaccine for HIV is available, the only way to prevent infection by the virus is to avoid behaviors that put you at risk of infection, such as sharing needles and having unprotected sex.

Latex or polyurethane male condoms, when used consistently and correctly, can reduce the risk of transmission of HIV.

Many people infected with HIV have no symptoms. Therefore, there is no way of knowing with certainty whether your sexual partner is infected unless he or she has repeatedly tested negative for the virus and has not engaged in any risky behavior. You should either abstain from having sex or use male latex condoms or female condoms, which may offer partial protection, during oral, anal, or vaginal sex.

For more information: Call the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at 1-800-232-4636, TTY: 1-888-232-6348 in English and Spanish.