

HIV and AIDS

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. There is no cure for HIV, but medication can reduce the amount of virus in the body and help you to stay healthy. Without treatment, HIV damages the immune system and may become Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

Causes

HIV is found in semen, blood, breast milk, vaginal and anal fluids. Most people get HIV by having unprotected vaginal or anal sex with someone who has HIV. In some cases, HIV may be passed during unprotected oral sex.

HIV can be passed when sharing drug equipment, such as syringes, with someone who has HIV. It can also be passed from a mother to her baby during pregnancy, birth, or during breast-feeding. Medications can be taken during pregnancy to prevent the virus from passing to the baby.

HIV does not live for long outside the body. It cannot be spread by casual contact such as kissing or sharing drinking glasses with someone who has HIV.

Symptoms

Common early symptoms of HIV infection are sometimes called seroconversion illness. These symptoms generally appear 2-4 weeks after infection and may include:

- Fever
- Sore throat
- Headache
- Muscle aches and joint pain
- Swollen glands (lymph nodes)

Complications

CD4 cells, a type of white blood cell, are an important part of the immune system. HIV enters and destroys CD4 cells. When the CD4 count is low, the body has little resistance against infection making it is easier to get infections or cancers that rarely occur in people with healthy immune systems.

Early treatment reduces harm to the immune system and helps people live healthier lives. Taking medication early may also lower the chances of passing HIV to other people.

Having HIV does not mean you have AIDS. AIDS occurs when a person's immune system has been severely weakened by HIV. Even without treatment, it takes a long time for HIV to progress to AIDS, usually 10 to 12 years.

Tests and Diagnosis

The only way to know for sure if you have HIV is to get a blood test. Tests either look for antibodies or a small amount of the HIV itself.

HIV antibodies are made by the immune system to fight the virus. Antibodies are usually present within three to six weeks after contact, though it can take up to three months. This is called the "window period" – the time between getting HIV and when the virus it can be found with an HIV test.

There are different ways to get tested:

- A sample of blood taken from the arm is sent to the lab for testing, with results usually back in 7 to 10 days
- A drop of blood is taken from your finger and results are available in a few minutes. This is called a point-of-care (POC) test or rapid test.

When you test for HIV, you have the option to use your full name or your initials. A limited number of clinics in BC offer anonymous HIV testing.

Treatment

The treatment for HIV is a combination of medicines called Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART). Taking HAART can lower the amount of virus in your body and help you to stay healthy.

Taking medication has become much easier over the past few years. New treatments include two or three medicines in one pill. Many people with HIV are treated with just one or two pills a day.

If your CD4 count and viral load are at healthy levels, you may not need treatment yet. As with any medications, there are pros and cons to taking HAART. Discuss these with your health care provider so you understand your choices.

Public Health and HIV

HIV is a reportable infection in British Columbia. If you have a positive HIV test, a public health nurse from the area where you took your test will contact the health care provider who ordered your test to see if any supports are needed. The public health nurse has experience working with HIV and is available to provide support, to connect you with clinical and community services and to help you tell any of your partners who you think should get tested.

Telling Partners

There are different ways you can tell partners. Some people want to tell partners in person, others want to ask a public health nurse to tell the partner anonymously. You can talk with your health care provider or the public health nurse which ways might work best for you.

Under Criminal Law in Canada, a person living with HIV has a duty to disclose their HIV status before having sex that poses a “realistic possibility of HIV transmission”. The term “realistic possibility of HIV transmission” can depend upon many factors such as type of exposure, whether a condom was used and the level of HIV (HIV viral load) that a person has.

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network is a good source for up-to-date legal information about HIV.

Additional HIV Prevention

In addition to the main things you can do to prevent STIs, here are more things you can do to lower the chance of HIV:

- Get tested for other STIs because they can increase your chance of getting HIV
- Do not share drug equipment such as needles, crack pipes, straws or mouthpieces
- Use new needles and drug equipment every time you inject

Living with HIV – If you or someone you know has just been diagnosed with HIV, you may have a lot of questions about what this means for your life. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- Use protection – condoms are an effective way to lower chances of STIs, including HIV
- Use new drug equipment when you inject and don’t share smoking or snorting equipment
- Get regular STI testing – other STIs can lower your immunity and increase the chances of passing HIV to your partners
- Get regular health care and regular testing to keep track of your viral load (a higher viral load can increase the chances of passing HIV to your partner)

If you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant, talk to your health care provider about ways to prevent passing HIV to your baby. Taking anti-HIV treatment during pregnancy is highly effective way to lower the chances of passing HIV to your baby.

Know Your Rights

The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network has published a series of brochures that talk about privacy rights and HIV disclosure for people living with HIV.

- Know Your Rights 1: Disclosure at work
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-1-disclosure-at-work/)
- Know Your Rights 2: Accommodation in the workplace
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-2-accommodation-in-the-workplace/)
- Know Your Rights 3: Remedies for discrimination and privacy violations in the workplace
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-3-remedies-for-discrimination-and-privacy-violations-in-the-workplace/)

- Know Your Rights 4: Disclosure and post-secondary education
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-4-disclosure-and-post-secondary-education/)
- Know Your Rights 5: Disclosure as a patient
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-5-disclosure-as-a-patient/)
- Know Your Rights 6: Privacy and health records
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-6-privacy-and-health-records/)
- Know Your Rights 7: Disclosure in school and daycare
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-7-disclosure-in-school-and-daycare/)
- Know Your Rights 8: Disclosure, privacy and parenting
(www.aidslaw.ca/site/know-your-rights-8-disclosure-privacy-and-parenting/)

Resources

AIDS Vancouver – www.aidsvancouver.org/

AIDS Vancouver Island - avi.org/

Vancouver Island Persons with AIDS Society - www.vpwas.com/

Heart of Richmond AIDS Society - heartofrichmond.com/

Living Positive Resource Centre - livingpositive.weebly.com/

Positive Living Fraser Valley - plfv.org/

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS – www.cfenet.ubc.ca/

Oak Tree Clinic – www.bcwomens.ca/Services/HealthServices/OakTreeClinic/default.htm

Positive Women’s Network – pwn.bc.ca/

Positive Living Society of British Columbia – www.positivelivingbc.org/

Healing Our Spirit BC Aboriginal HIV/AIDS Society - www.hosbc.org/

Sexuality and U – www.sexualityandu.ca/

The Body.com – www.thebody.com/

HealthLink BC – www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile08m.stm

Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network – www.aidslaw.ca/EN/index.htm

Vancouver Coastal Health Authority - http://www.vch.ca/your_health/health-topics/hiv_aids/

Vancouver Island Health Authority - www.viha.ca/mho/disease/hiv_sti.htm

Fraser Health Authority - www.fraserhealth.ca/your_health/health-topics/hiv_and_aids/hiv_and_aids_resources

Interior Health Authority - www.myhealthissexy.com

Northern Health Authority - hiv101.ca