

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV)

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that targets the body's immune system. It is passed through blood and body fluids such as semen, pre-ejaculate, vaginal fluids, anal fluids, and breast/chest milk.

HIV can be managed with antiviral medications.

Causes

HIV is passed through vaginal and anal sexual contact. This includes both penetrative sex and sexual activities where there is an exchange of body fluids. There is a very low chance that HIV may be passed through oral sex or when using sex toys.

HIV can also be passed through sharing drug equipment, such as needles.

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.

If you have HIV, you can pass it to others even if you don't have symptoms.

Symptoms

It is common to not notice any symptoms or to mistake HIV symptoms for a different illness. If you do get early symptoms, they will most likely show up between 2 to 4 weeks after sexual contact. Common early symptoms of HIV infection are called seroconversion illness. These symptoms include:

- fever
- sore throat
- headache
- muscle aches and joint pain
- swollen glands

Tests and Diagnosis

HIV testing is done with a blood sample. Tests either look for antibodies or a small amount of the virus itself. HIV antibodies are made by the immune system to fight the virus.

There are options for how to test for HIV, including:

- A blood sample is taken from the arm and is sent to a laboratory for testing.
- A drop of blood is taken from the finger and results are available in a few minutes. This is called the point of care (POC) test or rapid test. This test has a longer window period, meaning it takes longer before the results are accurate. POC testing is usually used as a screening test, so a blood sample will also need to be drawn.

Everyone should be tested for HIV at least once in their life. Talk to your health care provider about how often you should test. In general, it is best to get tested for HIV if you:

- have symptoms
- have a sexual partner who has tested positive for HIV
- have shared drug equipment such as needles
- are doing routine screening for STIs
- are pregnant

In British Columbia, you can test for HIV without using your real name. Contact your local clinic to see what options they offer. A limited number of clinics in BC offer anonymous HIV testing.

Window Period (how long to wait before testing):

There are different types of tests for HIV. Depending on the type of test used, most test results are accurate 3 weeks after you come in contact with HIV, but it can take up to 3 months. In British Columbia, most test results should be ready in 10 days.

Treatment

HIV is managed with prescription viral suppression medications called Highly Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART). Taking medication has become much easier over the past few years. New treatments include two or three medicines combined in one pill. Many people living with HIV are treated with just one or two pills a day.

Sexual Partners

If you have been diagnosed with HIV, your sexual partners should be tested. The chance of passing HIV to partners depends upon many factors, such as the level of HIV that a person has in their body (HIV viral load), the type of exposure, and whether a condom was used.

There are a few ways to tell partners. You can tell partners yourself or anonymously. Talk to your health care provider about what is right for you.

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

Complications

If HIV is treated early on, you are less likely to have other health problems. Early treatment helps to keep your immune system healthy. Taking medication early will also lower the chances of passing HIV to other people.

If left untreated, HIV can lead to serious complications.

If HIV weakens your immune system, it makes it easier to get infections or cancers that rarely occur in people with healthy immune systems. Having HIV does not mean you have AIDS. AIDS occurs when your 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.

Pregnancy: If you are pregnant, you should be screened for HIV. You can pass HIV to your child during birth and through breast-/chest-feeding.

Prevention

To help prevent getting HIV, you can:

- use condoms
- consider pre exposure prophylaxis (PrEP)
- consider post exposure prophylaxis (PEP)
- if you use drugs, do not share drug equipment such as needles or straws
- use new drug equipment every time you use drugs
- get tested for other STIs, because they can increase your chance of getting (or passing) HIV

It is a good idea to regularly test for STIs, especially if you have new sexual partners or open relationships. Talking with partners about safer sex makes sure everyone knows what to expect. Condoms are great if they work for you – the correct use of condoms reduces your chances of getting and passing HIV.

Resources

HealthLink BC – Information about HIV in multiple languages

<https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/hiv>

SmartSexResource – If you are worried or have anxiety about HIV

<https://smartsexresource.com/topics/worry-and-anxiety>

TransCareBC – Gender-affirming sexual and reproductive health information

<http://www.phsa.ca/transcarebc/care-support/access-care/sexual-hlth>

CATIE - HIV and emotional wellness: a booklet written for people living with HIV

<http://www.catie.ca/sites/default/files/pg-emo-wellness-en-07032018b.pdf>

HALCO & CATIE – HIV disclosure: a legal guide for gay men in Canada

<http://library.catie.ca/PDF/ATI-20000s/26081.pdf>

SexandU – Information on HIV and AIDS (Canadian)

<http://www.sexandu.ca/stis/hiv/>

The Body – Information on HIV and AIDS (USA)

<http://www.thebody.com/>

HIV Organizations in BC

AIDS Vancouver – HIV prevention and support in BC

<http://www.aidsvancouver.org/>

AIDS Vancouver Island – Education and support for people living with HIV and hepatitis C

<http://avi.org/>

Vancouver Island Persons with AIDS Society – Providing peer support to people living with HIV

<http://www.vpwas.com/>

Heart of Richmond AIDS Society – Local services and support for people impacted by HIV

<http://heartofrichmond.com/>

Living Positive Resource Centre – Support and advocacy services for people in the Central Okanagan

<http://lprc.ca/>

Positive Living Fraser Valley – Support and outreach to people living with HIV, hepatitis C and TB

<https://www.plfv.org/>

Oak Tree Clinic – BC Women’s Hospital outpatient care for HIV-positive pregnant women

<http://www.bcwomens.ca/our-services/specialized-services/hiv-care-for-women-families>

Positive Living Society of British Columbia – Support for HIV positive individuals in BC

<https://positivelivingbc.org/>

BC Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS – HIV and AIDS research in BC

<http://www.cfenet.ubc.ca/>

BC Health Authority Services

Island Health Authority – HIV services available to people living in the geographical area served by Island Health Authority

<http://www.viha.ca/mho/disease/hiv-aids>

Fraser Health Authority – HIV services and resources available to people living in the geographical area served by Fraser Health Authority

<https://www.fraserhealth.ca/health-topics-a-to-z/sexual-health/hiv#.XKKrzslKhaQ>

Interior Health Authority – HIV services and resources available to people living in the geographical area served by Interior Health Authority

<http://www.myhealthissexy.com/>

Northern Health Authority – HIV services and resources available to people living in the geographical area served by Northern Health Authority

<http://hiv101.ca/>