

HIV/AIDS and HIV Transmission

A Brief Definition of HIV and AIDS

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. If you are positive you are infected with this virus. Your body reacts by producing HIV antibodies. If you have access to an HIV blood test it will show these antibodies. If you are HIV positive you may have no symptoms and may remain healthy for many years. However, no matter how well you feel, the virus remains in your body and can be passed on to other people.

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. If you are HIV positive your immune system may be weakened. A weakened immune system means you may be vulnerable to a group of illnesses (syndromes) which would not affect a healthy person without the virus. These illnesses include tuberculosis, some cancers, and eye, skin and nervous system conditions and can be serious. However, being diagnosed with AIDS does not mean you cannot recover your health. Many positive people have a serious illness, recover, and go on to live well.

HIV can be transmitted through:

- Having unprotected (without a condom) vaginal or anal sex with someone who is HIV positive
- Sharing syringes and injecting equipment which have not been properly cleaned
- Contaminated medical equipment which has not been properly cleaned
- Being given untested blood transfusions or blood products which are infected with HIV
- Donor insemination with HIV infected semen

Vertical transmission of HIV from mother to baby can happen when:

- The virus is transmitted to the foetus across the placenta during pregnancy
- When the baby is infected during childbirth
- When the baby is infected through breast milk.

Children can also get HIV from:

- Receiving infected blood transfusions
- Receiving treatment with unsterile medical equipment such as needles, syringes or surgical instruments
- Suffering sexual abuse involving penetrative vaginal or anal sex.

It is unlikely that HIV will be transmitted through:

- Oral sex

Oral sex is when someone licks or sucks a man's penis or when someone licks or sucks a woman's clitoris or vagina. Some people think there may be a slight risk if a positive man's semen is swallowed. Even fewer people think there may be a small risk of transmission from a positive woman's vagina if someone is licking it. If a positive woman is menstruating, it may be advisable to avoid unprotected oral sex.

Compared to unprotected vaginal or anal penetrative sex, the risks of HIV transmission in oral sex are tiny. Some people prefer to use condoms or latex barriers such as dental dams or plastic wrap when engaging in oral sex. Other people weigh up the risks and decide they're so minimal that it's okay to go ahead without protection.

HIV is not transmitted by :

- Shaking hands or hugging
- Tears or sweat
- Sneezing or coughing
- Using other people's cutlery, glasses, plates or bed linen
- Using a toilet
- Dogs, cats or insect bites
- Kissing or saliva
- Eating from the same plate