

HIV & AIDS

BASIC FACTS



Canada's source for
HIV and hepatitis C
information



What are HIV & AIDS?

HIV is a virus that can make you sick.

- HIV weakens your immune system, your body's built-in defence against disease and illness.
- You can have HIV without knowing it. You may not look or feel sick for years, but you can still pass the virus on to other people.
- Without HIV treatment, your immune system can become too weak to fight off serious illnesses. HIV can also damage other parts of your body. Eventually, you can become sick with life-threatening infections. This is the most serious stage of HIV infection, called AIDS.

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus.

AIDS stands for Acquired ImmunoDeficiency Syndrome.

There is no cure for HIV... but there is treatment.

- There is no cure for HIV, but with proper care and treatment, most people with HIV can avoid getting AIDS and can stay healthy for a long time.
- Anti-HIV drugs have to be taken every day. They cannot get rid of HIV but they can keep it under control.

Who can get HIV?

Anyone can be infected with HIV, no matter...

- your age
- your sex
- your race or ethnic origin
- who you have sex with

How does HIV get passed from one person to another?

- Only five body fluids can contain enough HIV to infect someone: blood, semen (including pre-cum), rectal fluid, vaginal fluid and breast milk.
- HIV can only get passed when one of these fluids from a person with HIV gets into the bloodstream of another person—through broken skin, the opening of the penis or the wet linings of the body, such as the vagina, rectum or foreskin.
- HIV cannot pass through healthy, unbroken skin.

The two main ways that HIV can get passed between you and someone else are:

- through **unprotected sex** (anal or vaginal sex without a condom)
- by **sharing needles** or other equipment to inject drugs (including steroids)

HIV **can** also be passed:

- by sharing needles or ink to get a tattoo
- by sharing needles or jewellery to get a body piercing
- by sharing acupuncture needles
- to a fetus or baby during pregnancy, birth or breast-feeding

HIV **cannot** be passed by:

- talking, shaking hands, working or eating with someone who has HIV
- hugs or kisses
- coughs or sneezes
- swimming pools
- toilet seats or water fountains
- bed sheets or towels
- forks, spoons, cups or food
- insects or animals

HIV & Sex

HIV can be passed during unprotected sex.

This means:

- vaginal or anal sex without a condom
- oral sex without a condom or dental dam (a piece of latex used to cover the vulva or anus)
- sharing sex toys

Oral sex is not as risky as vaginal or anal sex, but it's not completely safe.

Protect yourself and your partner(s) from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

You can have sex with little or no risk of passing on or getting HIV. This is called **safer sex**.

Safer sex also helps protect you and your partner(s) from other STIs, such as gonorrhea and syphilis.

People can have HIV or other STIs without knowing it because these infections often do not cause symptoms. You could have HIV or another STI and not know it. Also, don't assume that your partner(s) knows whether they have HIV or any other STI. The only way to know for sure is to be tested.

To practise safer sex...

- Use a latex or polyurethane condom correctly every time you have vaginal or anal sex.
- Use only **water-based** or **silicone-based** lubricants. (Oil-based lubricants can make latex condoms break.)
- Get tested for STIs regularly. Having an STI increases your risk of getting and passing on HIV.
- Avoid sharing sex toys, and if you do, cover each one with a new condom before each use. It is also important to clean your toys between vaginal and anal use.
- Use a condom or dental dam every time you have oral sex.
- Choose forms of sexual stimulation that pose little or no risk for HIV, like masturbation or sensual massage.



HIV & Pregnancy

HIV can pass from a woman to her baby:

- during pregnancy
- at birth
- through breast-feeding

Protect your baby.

If you are HIV-positive and pregnant, proper HIV treatment and care can reduce the risk of your child being HIV-positive to **less than 2 percent**.

Talk with your healthcare provider to find out more.

If you are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, get tested for HIV.

If you are HIV-positive, with proper treatment you can have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby.

HIV & Drug Use

HIV can be passed on through shared needles and other drug equipment.

Sharing needles and other drug equipment is very risky.

Another virus called **hepatitis C** can also be spread when sharing drug equipment. Hepatitis C damages the liver. It is passed when the blood from someone who has hepatitis C gets into the bloodstream of another person.

Protect yourself and the people you do drugs with.

If you use drugs, there are things you can do to protect yourself and use drugs in a safer way. This is called **harm reduction**.

To practise safer drug use...

- Use a clean new needle and syringe every time you use.
- Use your own drug equipment (such as pipes, bills, straws, cookers, water, alcohol swabs) every time. Never share equipment, not even with your sex partner.
- Get new needles and supplies from your local harm reduction program, needle exchange or community health centre.
- Get tested for HIV and hepatitis C. If you know that you have HIV or hepatitis C, you can take steps to protect yourself and others.

If you do not have access to a needle exchange...

- **As a last resort**, your own needles can be cleaned before each time you use them, but it is still best not to share with other people. Cleaning means flushing the syringe twice with clean water, twice with bleach, and then twice with new water. Each flushing should last 30 seconds. **This will kill HIV, but it will not protect you from hepatitis C.**

HIV & Blood Products

Since November 1985, all blood products in Canada are checked for HIV. A person's risk of getting infected from a blood transfusion in Canada is **extremely low**.

There is no chance of getting HIV from donating blood.



HIV & the Law

In Canada if you have HIV, you have a legal duty to tell your sex partner(s) before having any kind of sex that poses a "realistic possibility of transmitting HIV." People with HIV have been convicted of serious crimes for not telling their sex partners they have HIV. Based on the law:

- You **do** have a legal duty to disclose your HIV status:
 - before having vaginal or anal sex without a condom, regardless of your viral load; or
 - before having vaginal or anal sex when your viral load is not undetectable (or not low), even if you use a condom.

- You **do not** have a duty to disclose before having *vaginal* sex if your viral load is low (or undetectable) and you use a condom. It is not clear whether this also applies to *anal* sex.
- It is not clear how the law applies to oral sex (with or without a condom).

For more information on HIV and the law, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. It may be able to refer you to a lawyer but cannot provide you with legal advice.

You are better off knowing if you have HIV.

If you know you have HIV, you can get the treatment and care you need to stay healthy and avoid passing it on to others.

If you think you may have been exposed to HIV, it is important to get tested.

- The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested. The HIV test is a simple blood test.
- After HIV enters the body, it may take time before the test can detect the virus (this is known as the **window period**). Different HIV tests have different window periods.
- Don't wait. Speak to a health-care provider about getting tested for HIV as well as other STIs and hepatitis C.

You can't tell whether you have been infected with HIV by how you feel.

- Some people have flu-like symptoms when they first get infected (fever, sore throat or swollen glands). But some people have no symptoms at all.
- You can have HIV and not know it.

If you test positive:

- There have been significant advances in the care and treatment of HIV, and with the right treatment, you can stay healthy.
- To protect yourself and your partner(s), practise safer sex and do not share drug equipment.
- Get connected. Contact CATIE for more information on HIV services in your area.

About one in every four Canadians with HIV does not know they have it. The only way to know for sure if you have HIV is to get tested.

An HIV test could save your life.

Contact Information:

For more information on HIV, contact:

- a public health unit
- your local sexual health or family planning clinic
- your local AIDS organization
- an AIDS and sexual health hotline
- your doctor or primary healthcare provider
- a community health centre or, in Quebec, a CLSC

Need more information and resources on HIV or hepatitis C?

Contact CATIE at:
1-800-263-1638 • www.catie.ca

CATIE accepts collect calls from Canadian prisons.



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