

AIDS and HIV infection

What is AIDS?

Acquired—not inherited

Immune—body's defence system

Deficiency—not working properly

Syndrome—a collection of signs and symptoms

What is the cause of AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus called the *human immunodeficiency virus* (HIV). It may start as an acute glandular fever or flu-like illness that soon settles. However, the incubation period seems to vary from 3 months to 20 years (average 10 years), after which about 30% of people infected with HIV will develop full-blown AIDS, 40% may develop milder AIDS-related conditions (ARC) and 30% appear to remain healthy although carrying the virus. These fit people are called *antibody positive*, and although they are healthy they can pass the virus on to others. However, usual non-sexual contact is safe and an HIV positive person is otherwise not a risk to the general population.

How do you catch HIV?

HIV is transmitted in semen, blood and vaginal fluids through:

- unprotected sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal) with an infected person and, rarely, from oral sex
- infected blood entering the body (through blood transfusion or by IV drug users sharing needles/syringes)
- artificial insemination
- infected mothers (to babies during pregnancy, at birth or in breast milk)

It is not 'easy to catch' other than by these means. There is no evidence anywhere that it is spread from public places (e.g. toilets, swimming pools), shaking hands or kissing, eating utensils and so on.

Infection with HIV can occur via the vagina, rectum or open cuts and sores, including any on the lips or in the mouth.

What are the symptoms?

Most patients with HIV infection have no symptoms, but when AIDS develops any one or a combination of the following may be present:

- constant tiredness
- unexplained weight loss

- recurrent fever or night sweats
- decreased appetite
- persistent diarrhoea
- persistent cough
- swollen lumps (glands) in the neck, groin or armpit
- unusual skin lumps or marks
- recurrent thrush in the mouth
- mouth sores

What does 'antibody positive' mean?

It means that people have antibodies to HIV in their bloodstream and have been infected at some stage. It does not mean they have the illness of AIDS, but means that they carry the virus and could pass it on through their blood or by sex. This antibody is detected by a special laboratory test. It may take up to 3 or even 6 months to become positive after contact.

How are HIV positive people monitored?

Immune status is measured through CD₄ cell counts. HIV concentration in the blood is measured through viral load tests. These tests help reassure infected people and allow the doctors to work out when treatment will be necessary.

Can AIDS be cured or treated?

There is no cure at present, but it can be treated. There are several antiviral drugs including *zidovudine* (AZT) that fight HIV and can prolong the lives of people with AIDS. It is expected that new drugs being developed will be even more effective. At present a combination of 3 of these drugs is producing better remissions.

What about blood transfusion and blood donation?

You cannot catch AIDS from donating blood. Since about 1985 all blood donations have been screened for the HIV antibody before being transfused, and so there is almost no risk of getting it from a transfusion now.

What is safe sex?

'Safe sex' means sexual activities in which semen, vaginal secretions or blood are not exchanged between sexual partners. It includes touching, cuddling, body-to-body rubbing and mutual masturbation. The proper use of condoms during vaginal, anal or oral intercourse will reduce the risk of transmitting HIV. A water-based lubricant such as KY jelly or Lubafax should be used: oil-based lubricants such as Vaseline weaken condoms.