

# HIV and AIDS: What You Need to Know

HIV is a virus that can lead to AIDS. Although there is no cure for HIV, early diagnosis and treatment are very effective at keeping people healthy and living full lives. Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) about HIV and AIDS, including how to prevent HIV and AIDS.

## What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV is a virus that causes damage to the body's immune system. The immune system is the body's way of fighting infections. When the immune system does not work well, the body cannot fight off many types of infections, including ones that can become life threatening.

The damage to the immune system that is caused by HIV can occur over months, as sometimes happens when infants have HIV. In adults with HIV, the damage can occur more slowly.

AIDS is the final stage of HIV. People with HIV are said to have AIDS when their immune systems are severely damaged to the point that HIV-related infections or cancers occur. Not everyone who has HIV will get AIDS.

## How is HIV spread?

Because it can take years for symptoms to develop, many people do not know they have HIV. During this time, they can unknowingly spread the virus to others. Most people with HIV appear healthy. A blood test is the only way to be sure.

### HIV can be spread

- By sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) with a person who has HIV.
- Through contact with an HIV-infected person's blood. This can happen when sharing syringes or needles, accidentally getting stuck by a needle with a person's blood on it, or coming into contact with other body fluids containing blood.
- From a mother with HIV to their baby during pregnancy, labor, delivery, or breastfeeding or by sharing pre-chewed food.
- Through blood or blood products from blood transfusions, organ transplants, or artificial insemination. This type of spread is very rare because donated blood, sperm, tissue, and organs are routinely screened and tested for HIV.

### HIV *cannot* be spread

- Through everyday contact, like shaking hands, hugging, sitting next to, playing, or sharing a glass, utensil, or plate, with a person with HIV
- By eating food prepared by a person with HIV
- Through the air, insect bites, or donated blood
- By sharing bathrooms or swimming pools that have been used by a person with HIV

## What your children should know about HIV and AIDS

Teach your children the facts about HIV and AIDS, including how HIV is not spread (see *How is HIV spread?*) and how HIV can be prevented.

### Young children will not be able to understand all the information, but they should know

- To never touch anyone else's blood.
- To never touch needles or syringes. If they find one, they should not touch it and they should tell an adult.

### Older children and teens should know about

- Abstinence. The best way for a person to protect themselves against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is to not have any type of sex (vaginal, anal, or oral).

- **Condoms.** The best way to lower the risk for HIV and other STIs, if a person is sexually active, is to use a latex condom correctly every time they have sex and to limit their number of sexual partners. If teens are sexually active, encourage them and their partners to be tested for HIV and other STIs before they start sexual activity with each other.
- **Drug use.** Drugs injected with needles or syringes are the riskiest because the needle or syringe can spread blood from one person to another. Also, using alcohol, marijuana, or other drugs can increase the risk for HIV. That's because drugs affect a person's judgment and can lead to risky behaviors, like having sex without a condom or with multiple partners.
- **PrEP.** PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, means taking a medicine before engaging in high-risk behaviors that can lower the risk for HIV. Avoiding these behaviors is ideal, but if you suspect that your teen may be engaging in such behaviors, consider talking with their doctor about PrEP.

## Who should be tested for HIV?

The AAP recommends at least one routine HIV screening for all teens 15 years and older. In most states, HIV testing is strongly recommended for pregnant women during routine prenatal care.

Anyone involved in the risky behaviors listed previously (see *What your children should know about HIV and AIDS*) should get an HIV test, and they may need to be retested frequently if risk-taking behaviors continue. Keep in mind, a negative test result does not mean a person is safe if the risky behaviors took place only a few weeks before the test. That's because it can take several weeks to months for the HIV test result to become positive.

Here are symptoms that may suggest a need for HIV testing.

- Persistent fevers
- Loss of appetite
- Frequent diarrhea
- Poor weight gain or rapid weight loss
- Swelling of the lymph nodes (glands) that does not go away
- Extreme tiredness or lethargy that does not go away with rest
- White spots in the mouth
- Recurring or unusual infections

## How is HIV treated?

There is no cure for HIV or AIDS. However, there are medicines that can suppress the infection so symptoms do not develop. These medicines also prevent the virus from spreading to other people and, in the case of a pregnant woman, to a fetus. Because early treatment of an HIV infection (before there are symptoms of AIDS) is most effective at preventing symptoms and keeping people healthy, it is important to get tested to know whether you have an HIV infection. If you do, you can stay healthy for many years—and even your whole life—if you start taking medicines early after you find out you have HIV and keep taking them consistently.

Visit [HealthyChildren.org](https://www.healthychildren.org) for more information.

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