



HIV Infection

What is HIV?

HIV is a virus – the human immunodeficiency virus - that attacks the immune system, the body's built-in defense against infection. HIV weakens your immune system by destroying important cells that fight disease and infection. Without treatment, the immune system becomes too weak resulting in a progressive and chronic illness called AIDS, the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome. This is the most serious stage of HIV infection that makes infected people vulnerable to other infections and cancers.

What are the symptoms of HIV infection?

- Two to six weeks after being infected with HIV, a person may develop symptoms such as, muscle aches, fever, sore throat, headache, rash, nausea and vomiting. Symptoms usually disappear within a few weeks.
- Most infected people are then free of any symptoms for many years until they develop AIDS, usually 10 to 15 years later.
- Symptoms of AIDS may include loss of appetite, weight loss, diarrhea, fever, lethargy, fatigue, or the symptoms of a number of infections, cancers or other conditions.

How is HIV spread?

HIV is found in varying amounts in blood, semen and vaginal fluid. HIV can only get passed when one of these fluids from a person with HIV gets into contact with broken skin or wet lining of the body, such as the vagina, rectum or foreskin of another person. HIV cannot pass through healthy, unbroken skin. A person infected with HIV can spread the virus at any stage of HIV infection, but is most contagious in early stages of infection.

HIV is frequently passed to someone else through unprotected anal or vaginal sex. The risk is the highest for sexual encounters among men who have sex with men. The risk from oral sex is lower, but still exists. The presence of other sexually transmitted infections or ulcers increases the risk for HIV transmission.

HIV may also be passed by sharing needles or other equipment used to inject drugs, by tattooing, body piercing and acupuncture treatment when contaminated equipment is used.

HIV may also be passed to a fetus or baby during pregnancy, birth or breast-feeding.

HIV is not passed by talking, shaking hands, working or eating with someone who has HIV, hugs or kisses, coughs or sneezes, swimming pools and toilet seats, bed sheets, towels, forks, spoons, cups or food and insects or animals.

How is HIV infection diagnosed?

HIV antibodies, a protein the body produces to fight off HIV infection, are most commonly detected with a blood test. If the blood contains HIV antibodies, the person is infected by HIV (also called seropositive). Other tests (e.g. detecting virus genetic material) can also be used.

You can be tested at any time for HIV or other STIs, particularly if engaging in high-risk activities. Modern tests may detect HIV infection as early as 2-3 weeks after exposure to the virus (when you came into contact with the virus), but testing may need to be repeated 3 months after exposure to HIV. Individuals involved in high risk practices may need to be screened regularly however it is advised that you discuss this with your health care provider.

How is HIV infection treated?

There is no cure for HIV but there is effective antiviral treatment that can slow the progression of HIV infection and the development of AIDS. With proper care and treatment, most people with HIV can stay healthy for a long time. Most infected persons will need to take HIV medications their entire lives. HIV-infected pregnant women who take HIV medications can significantly decrease the risk of transmitting HIV to a fetus or newborn.

Who is at risk of HIV infection?

The following individuals might be at high risk of HIV infection:

- Individuals having unprotected anal or vaginal intercourse;
- Men having sex with other men;
- Individuals having several sex partners and anonymous partners;
- Individuals who have shared drug use equipment;
- Individuals diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection or hepatitis B and C
- Victims of sexual assault;
- Those who received blood or blood product in Canada prior to November 1985; and,
- Infants born to HIV-infected mothers.

How can HIV infection be prevented?

- Individuals who are sexually active should:
 - » Limit the number of sexual partners and avoid sex with people whose sexual history is unknown.
 - » Always use condoms when having sex (vaginal, oral, or anal). A dental dam (a sheet of latex) or a male condom cut open should be used for oral sex.
 - » Avoid the use of alcohol and other drugs that might cloud thinking and lead to high-risk behavior.
- Individuals who inject drugs should:
 - » Not share needles or injection drug equipment with others.
 - » Use only clean needles and equipment.
- Be cautious about body piercings, tattoos and acupuncture. Make sure single-use, disposable needles are used and that all other equipment is disinfected and sterile.
- If you are likely to be in contact with blood or other bodily fluids in your work take appropriate precautions, such as wearing latex gloves.
- Appropriate treatment is known to reduce the risk of transmitting HIV.
- Healthcare providers can provide information on how to obtain clean needles and how to get HIV or drug treatment programs.

What is the public health response?

If you are diagnosed with HIV, your health-care provider will treat you and give you information on sexually transmitted and blood-borne infections. A Public Health nurse may contact you to support you in contacting your partners.

It may be necessary to contact your sexual and drug use partners since the onset of your behavior at-risk or the last known HIV-negative test before HIV was detected in you. Your children may also need to be tested.

All discussions are strictly confidential.

Further Information

For additional information, contact your health-care provider, Tele-Care 811, local Public Health office or visit the [government of New Brunswick](#) website.

To find HIV services near you, please visit the [HCV411.ca](#) website.