



# HIV Infection

## What is HIV?

Human immunodeficiency virus is a sexually transmitted blood-borne infection (STBBI) caused by the Human immunodeficiency virus (HIV). The virus attacks the body's immune system which is the body's defence in preventing other diseases and illnesses. Without treatment, it can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

There is currently no effective cure. Once people get HIV, they have it for life. But proper medical care can control the virus.

People with HIV who get on and stay on effective HIV treatment can live long, healthy lives and protect their partners.

## What are the symptoms?

- Some people don't have any symptoms the only way to know is to get tested.
- Two to six weeks after being infected with HIV, a person may develop symptoms such as, chills, fever, fatigue, joint pain, sore throat, headache, muscle aches, rash, nausea, vomiting, and/or diarrhea.
- Symptoms usually disappear on their own within a few weeks, and most infected people are then free of any symptoms for many years until they develop AIDS, up to 10 to 15 years later.
- Symptoms of AIDS may include loss of appetite, weight loss, diarrhea, fever, lethargy, fatigue, or the symptoms of several infections, cancers, or other conditions.

## How is HIV spread?

HIV is found in varying amounts in blood, semen, bodily fluids such as vaginal or rectal fluid, and breast milk. It's passed on when one of these fluids from a person with HIV gets into the bloodstream of someone who doesn't have HIV-through broken skin or the parts of the body that have wet linings(mucous membranes) such as the vagina, rectum, or foreskin.

## A-Z DISEASE FACT SHEETS

HIV is commonly spread through:

- Unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex with an HIV positive person who still has enough virus present in their system to pass the infection on. A person infected with HIV can spread the virus at any stage of HIV infection but is most contagious in early stages of infection.
- Sharing equipment for preparing or consuming drugs (such as syringes, pipes, straws, spoons, cookers).

It can also be spread through:

- Tattoo, body piercing, or acupuncture equipment that was not properly sterilized.
- From an infected mother to a fetus in utero, a newborn infant at the time of birth, or through the breast milk of a person with HIV.

HIV cannot be passed on through healthy, unbroken skin or 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 diagnosed?

- It's important to be tested for HIV and other STBBIs regularly, especially if people choose to engage in practices that put them at a higher risk of coming into contact with the STBBIS than others.
- Testing for HIV is done using a blood test. 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 3-6 months after exposure to HIV.
- The most common blood tests done look for HIV antibodies, a protein the body produces to fight off HIV infection. 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.

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### How is HIV treated?

There is no vaccine or cure for HIV but there is effective antiviral treatment that help manage HIV infections. Most infected persons will need to take HIV medications their entire lives. With proper treatment and care, people with HIV can lower the level of HIV in their body and slow the progression of HIV infection which:

- Allows them to stay healthy for a long time can and prevent the development of AIDS.
- Can significantly decrease the risk of transmitting HIV from an infected mother to a fetus or newborn.
- Can lower the risk of passing on HIV through sex.

### Who is at risk of HIV infection?

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

- People who have unprotected vaginal, anal, or oral sex, or who have multiple sexual partners.
- People who do not use new equipment for drug use and/or who share equipment with others.
- People engaging in anal sex or rough sex without the use of proper lubricants even when a condom is used.
- Individuals diagnosed with a sexually transmitted infection or hepatitis B and C
- 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.

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Individuals who inject drugs should:

- Not share needles or injection drug equipment with others.
- Use only new needles and equipment. New supplies for drug and substance use can be found at many community agencies around the province.

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 treatment can reduce the risk of spread. They may also be able to provide direction on where to obtain new equipment for drug use and referrals to drug treatment programs.

### What is the public health response?

Contact your local sexual health clinic, or your primary care provider with any questions, for testing, or for further education about HIV. Public Health recommends that all sexually active New Brunswickers have testing for all sexually transmitted diseases at the same time and on a regular basis. When you “test for one, test for all” you will be tested for gonorrhea, chlamydia, hepatitis, syphilis, the Human Papillomavirus (HPV), and HIV/AIDS.

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 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 STBBI website at: [www.gnb.ca/sexualhealth](http://www.gnb.ca/sexualhealth)

## A-Z DISEASE FACT SHEETS

To find HIV services near you, please visit the HCV411.ca website at: [Where to? \(catie.ca\)](http://Where to? (catie.ca))

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