

HIV & Aids: What Teens Need To Know

What do I need to know about HIV and AIDS?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). AIDS is a very serious and deadly disease that can affect people of any age. While there is no cure for HIV, early diagnosis and treatment are very effective at keeping people healthy and delaying progression to AIDS. In addition, there are things you can do to prevent getting HIV. Read on to learn more about HIV and AIDS.

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 serious illnesses.

The damage caused by HIV can occur over months, as sometimes happens when infants have HIV. In adults with HIV, the damage can occur more slowly. People with HIV are said to have AIDS when their immune systems are severely damaged or when certain other infections or cancers occur.

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 look and act healthy. You cannot tell just by looking at people whether they have HIV. A blood test is the only way to be sure.

How HIV Is Spread

HIV can be spread in the following ways:

- By sexual intercourse (vaginal, anal, or oral) with a person who has HIV. Both males and females can spread 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 contact with other body fluids containing blood.
- To a baby by a mother with HIV during pregnancy, labor, delivery, or breastfeeding.
- Through blood or blood products from blood transfusions, organ transplants, or artificial insemination. This is very rare because today donated blood, sperm, tissue, and organs are routinely screened and tested for HIV.

How HIV Is Not Spread

It is very important to know how HIV is not spread. You cannot get HIV by

- Shaking hands or hugging a person with HIV
- Sitting next to or playing with a person with HIV
- Eating food prepared by a person with HIV

Also, you cannot get HIV from

- The air
- Insect bites
- Giving blood
- Sharing bathrooms
- Swimming pools

How Not To Get HIV/AIDS:

- Never touch anyone else's blood.
- Never touch needles or syringes. If you find one in the garbage or on the ground, tell an adult.
- Abstinence. The best way to protect themselves against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) is to not have any type of sex (vaginal, anal, or oral). Many people wait to have sex.
- Condoms. The best way to lower the risk of getting HIV and other STIs, if you are sexually active, is to use a latex condom and limit the number of sexual partners you have. Other forms of birth control will not protect you from HIV or other STIs. If you are sexually active, you and your partners should be tested for HIV and STIs before sexual activity.
- Drug use. Drugs that are injected with needles are the riskiest because the needle or syringe can spread blood from one person to another. Using other drugs like alcohol or cocaine can also increase the risk of getting HIV. This is because drugs affect a person's judgment and can lead to risky behaviors, like having sex without a condom or with multiple partners.