



# HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

## What is HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is a blood borne virus which attacks your immune system - your body's defence against disease.

HIV is not very common among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people but more people in our community are getting it every year.

We need to get informed about HIV so we can stop people in our community from getting it.

## What is AIDS?

Some people say AIDS when they mean HIV. But AIDS is different to HIV.

"AIDS" stands for "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome". AIDS is very serious and life-threatening.

If you don't get treated for HIV you can go on to get AIDS.

In Australia, people with HIV generally no longer get AIDS. This is because people in Australia who have HIV can get treatment – medicine called antiretrovirals. People who get treated for HIV do not get AIDS.

## How do you get HIV?

You can get HIV from someone who has HIV if the blood, semen (cum) or vaginal fluid gets into your blood stream.

In Australia the most common way of getting HIV is from having sex without condoms with someone who has HIV.

People who have other STIs are more likely to get HIV from having sex with someone who has HIV. STIs are very common in our community, so it's important to use condoms to protect against HIV as well as other STIs.



You can also get HIV by sharing injecting drug equipment – syringes or needles – with someone who has HIV, or by sharing tattoo or body piercing equipment with someone who has HIV.

You can get HIV if you have an open cut and the blood from a person who has HIV gets directly into an open cut.

Babies can get HIV from their mother during pregnancy, childbirth or while breastfeeding.

**Can you get HIV from food, water, mosquitoes, toilet seats? Or by kissing or hugging?**  
No.

You cannot get HIV from water, or from food – even if the food was prepared by someone who has HIV.

You will not get HIV if someone who has it sneezes or coughs near you, shakes your hand, or hugs or kisses you.

### **Safe sex**

Condoms can protect against passing on HIV during sex, and also protect against other STIs. It's especially important to always use condoms with new sex partners.

### **Safe injecting**

Do not share injecting equipment with someone else. HIV can be passed on in infected blood.

A needle or syringe might look clean but there could be a tiny amount of blood you can't see. You can get clean needles and syringes in chemists, health clinics, and community centres.

### **Safe tattooing and piercing**

Do not share tattooing equipment with someone else. HIV can be passed on in small amounts of blood you can't see.



It's best to get tattoos in a tattoo shop because you can make sure they use clean equipment.

### **PEP – post exposure prophylaxis**

PEP means taking prescription tablets because you have had unsafe sex or shared drug injecting equipment.

If you've had unsafe sex, or shared injecting or tattooing equipment with someone who has HIV, PEP tablets can kill off any HIV in your system.

It's important to get PEP within 72 hours of having unsafe sex, or sharing injecting or tattoo equipment.

If you have unsafe sex or share injecting or tattooing equipment, go to your local sexual health clinic, hospital emergency department or GP as soon as you can, and ask about PEP.

If you ask about PEP and they aren't able to prescribe it, ask them to call the closest sexual health service to find out where you might be able to get it.

### **Symptoms – how would I know if I got HIV?**

People who get HIV don't have any symptoms for several weeks after getting it, and then may just think they have the flu. After that they can feel quite well for months or years before getting very sick. This means you can have HIV and not know it.

The only way of knowing whether you have HIV is to get tested.

### **Testing for HIV**

Testing for HIV can be done at the clinic. They will take a blood sample. You can get tested as part of your men's or women's health check – just ask.

If you've had sex without a condom or shared injecting equipment ask at the clinic about getting tested.

Get tested for STIs at least every six to 12 months. If you have other STIs, ask for an HIV test.



## **Don't be shame**

Testing for HIV means you're looking after your health. If more people in our community test for HIV and get treated, everyone is better off.

Test results are confidential. Your partner will not be told about your result without your permission. No-one else in your family or community will be told about your result without your permission.

## **If I have HIV, who will be told?**

The lab that tests your blood will tell your doctor the result of your HIV test. They are not allowed to tell anyone else.

HIV test results are sent to health departments so we know whether STI and BBV rates are going up or down in a community. Your name will not be given to the department – just a code. This is to protect your privacy.

## **What's the treatment for HIV?**

There is no cure for HIV. People with HIV need to take tablets called antiretrovirals every day for the rest of their life. These tablets don't cure HIV but if people who have HIV keep taking the tablets every day they can live very healthy lives.

Getting treated for HIV and keeping healthy doesn't stop you picking up other STIs. If you have HIV it's important to keep using condoms and to keep testing regularly for STIs – at least every six to 12 months.

## **What if I don't get treated?**

If left untreated HIV damages the body's immune system. This means that without treatment, someone who has HIV can go on to get AIDS or other sickness.

## **Letting partners know they need to test**

If you are diagnosed with HIV, your doctor will talk to you about letting the people you had sex or shared injecting equipment with know they should get tested. This is to make sure they don't have HIV too. This is called "contact tracing".



Letting other people know they should test is not about blame. It's just to make sure that as many people as possible who may have HIV get tested and treated.

The clinic can help you with contact tracing – but only with your permission. This is confidential – the clinic will let people you have had sex with know that it's time to have a test. The clinic will not mention your name to the people they contact.

If you prefer to do this yourself, have a look at the *Better to know* website for advice about different ways you can let people you've had sex with know that they need to have a test – including on how to do this anonymously - without giving your name.

**Condoms can stop STIs and BBVs from spreading - here's how to use a condom:**

- ⦿ Check expiry date, check the package is not damaged and open with care
- ⦿ Pinch the tip so air doesn't get trapped
- ⦿ Roll on when the penis is hard
- ⦿ Use water-based lubricant (lube). Oil based lubricant can damage the condom
- ⦿ When withdrawing, hold the base of the condom so semen (cum) doesn't spill out
- ⦿ Tie a knot in the used condom and put it in the bin. Not down the toilet as it will block the pipes.

*Let's look after our health and get tested for HIV. If we all test and get treated, we can stop the spread of HIV in our community.*

**Want to know more about HIV?** Visit [www.atsihiv.org.au](http://www.atsihiv.org.au)