



HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV)

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What is it?

- The virus that causes AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome)

Signs and Symptoms

- HIV is a virus that attacks and seriously damages the body's immune system. When the body's immune system is damaged it cannot fight infections.
- It takes 6 to 12 weeks for HIV to show up in the blood after someone is infected.
- For this reason, you should have an HIV blood test 6 to 12 weeks after you think you were in contact with the virus.

How do you get in?

- HIV is found in blood, semen, pre-semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk of infected people. The virus is spread by:
 - Unprotected anal, vaginal, or oral sex
 - Sharing needles and other injecting equipment (i.e. spoons, water filters) and/or other drug equipment (i.e. crack pipes, straws)
 - From infected mother to baby during pregnancy, delivery, or through breast milk
 - Sharing ear/body piercing and tattoo equipment

Treatment

- There are drugs that are used to help fight HIV.

- These medications can help reduce and prevent symptoms as well as treat infections and prolong life.
- These drugs are not a cure but can help to prolong life and good health.
- Good nutrition, regular exercise and getting enough sleep and rest are all important steps in taking care of yourself.
- Avoiding cigarettes, drugs and alcohol is recommended.
- Regular medical follow up is important.
- People who are infected may remain healthy for years.

Complications

- Over time the immune system grows weak and people become sick with different illnesses.
- It is these illnesses, infections, and cancers that cause death because the body has no defense left.
 - This final stage of HIV infection is AIDS.

Prevention

- Practice safer sex; always use a condom during sexual intercourse.
- Never share needles or other equipment for injecting drugs or steroids.
- Never share tools for snorting drugs (e.g. straws, rolled up bills, crack pipes, etc.)
- Do not touch blood or body fluids without wearing gloves.

- Ensure that tattoo and body piercing businesses sterilize equipment and do not re-use needles.

If you are HIV positive you must tell your partners prior to any sexual activity.

HIV is a reportable disease and must be reported to the Local Medical Officer of Health under the Health Protection and Promotion Act.