

UNDERSTANDING AIDS

What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for:

ACQUIRED

a disease that a person can only catch from another person who has the disease already

IMMUNODEFICIENCY

a breakdown in the body's defence system that fights off infections

SYNDROME

a collection of complaints or illnesses that can occur together.

How does one get AIDS?

For a person to develop AIDS s/he must first become infected with a virus called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). When this happens the person's defense system starts to break down after a period of time and diseases and infections develop more easily than they would normally in a person not infected with the virus. When an infected individual starts to develop one or more of these illnesses they are said to have AIDS. It takes from 4 to 8,5 years before an individual infected with the HIV virus starts to develop these illnesses. Thus there is a difference between being infected with the virus and having AIDS. People who are infected with the virus but have not yet developed AIDS do not know they are carrying the virus (unless they have had blood tests) and can pass on the virus unknowingly to other people.

How is AIDS passed on or transmitted?

The virus is not easily passed on. It is found in the blood and is transmitted through blood and semen. Although the virus has been found in urine, saliva, tears and breast milk it is unlikely to spread to others through these body fluids. In order for a person to become infected with the HIV virus it must enter the person's body through the rectum, vagina, breaks in the skin or mouth (eg cuts, grazes and sores). Once outside the body, the virus quickly dies. The virus CANNOT be passed on through the air by sneezing or coughing or through casual contact such as touching the infected person or touching things used by that person (such as knives, forks, cups, basins, toilet seats and baths).

Anybody can be infected by the virus

These are the ways that the virus is most likely to be spread:

SEXUAL CONTACT

man to man / man to woman

-The HIV virus can be spread by semen entering the vagina or rectum.

-It can also be spread when having oral sex if there are cuts or sores in the mouth.

woman to man

-Vaginal secretions of infected women can contain the HIV virus and so spread can occur by the virus entering the penis. Spread is even more likely to occur if there are sores on the penis and in or around the vagina. Other venereal diseases like syphilis can cause these sores through which the virus enter the bloodstream.

-Menstrual blood from an infected woman can also pass on the virus.

woman to woman

- There have been very few reported cases of HIV transmission in women due to lesbian sexual practice.
- Spread of the virus can occur if cuts or open sores on fingers, in and around the mouth or genital area come into contact with infected vaginal secretions or blood.

BLOOD TRANSFUSIONS

- One cannot get the disease by giving blood but people getting blood from an infected person can become infected.
- All donated blood in South Africa is now tested for the virus and if it is found the blood will not be used.



Donors cannot catch the virus by donating blood

INJECTING DRUGS

-People who inject themselves with drugs can get the virus if they share needles and syringes that have been used by a person with the virus in their blood.

PREGNANCY

-Pregnant women with the virus can pass it onto their unborn children. As regards breast feeding by HIV positive mothers, consideration should be given to the socio-economic environment of the mother-child pair. If alternatives to breast feeding are not safe or effective, breast feeding by the biological mother should continue. (WHO Expert Group.)

ARTIFICIAL INSEMINATION / ORGANS DONATIONS

-People who have the virus in their blood and who donate their semen or organs (livers, kidneys, hearts) can pass on the virus to the person receiving these organs or semen.



Blood samples are tested in the laboratory for the HIV virus

How can one test for the HIV virus?

When a person catches the virus the body makes very small particles in the blood stream which try to fight off the virus. These particles are called antibodies. The tests mentioned below show whether these antibodies are present in the blood. If these antibodies are found it does not necessarily mean the person has developed AIDS. It means they have been in contact with a person who has the virus and have been infected. This person is now a "carrier" of the virus and although s/he may not have AIDS and may not feel ill, s/he can still pass on the virus to other people.

If the test is positive (ie the antibodies are found) it may have severe affects on the person's psychological wellbeing. It may also result in discrimination in his/her personal and work life. For these reasons people who want to be tested are urged to receive counselling before taking this decision.

The names of these tests are:

- ELISA TEST
- WESTERN BLOT TEST
- IMMUNOFLUORESCENT ANTIBODY TEST

These tests can be wrong but this doesn't happen often. In order to be absolutely certain about positive results (results that say you have the virus) the people who test for the virus in South Africa will do two ELISA tests at different times if the first one is positive and then another one (eg the Western Blot test) to finally check that the result is positive. If the first test is negative no further tests are done and the person can be over 99% certain they are not infected with the virus. It can take up to 6 weeks after a person has caught the virus for the body to make antibodies. This means that for 6 weeks the virus may be in a person's blood stream and the tests will not show up positive. This person can still pass on the disease during these 6 weeks. This is one of the problems with the test.

It takes between 4 and 8,5 years for a person infected with the virus to develop AIDS. It is now thought that most people who become infected with the virus will eventually go on to develop AIDS.

What are the symptoms of AIDS?

All of the following complaints can occur in illnesses other than AIDS. The presence of a few of these symptoms does not mean that person has AIDS.

- glands in the neck and other parts of the body become swollen
- a feeling of being very tired for no obvious reason
- loss of weight more than 10% of what the person weighed before several weeks
- high temperatures and sweating at night - lasting many weeks
- diarrhoea (running stomach or watery stools) lasting longer than one week with no obvious cause (for example, drinking dirty water)
- shortness of breath and a dry cough
- skin diseases; they look like pink/purple blotches
- illnesses of the brain (infections and becoming confused)
- Kaposi's sarcoma. This is a rare type of skin cancer
- a rare kind of lung infection called Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia
- a fungal infection in the mouth and throat called Thrush (Candidiasis) that will not go away

How can we stop the disease spreading?

- Know your sexual partner, people who have sex with a lot of different people have more chance of having sex with a person who has the virus.

- Avoid any type of rough sex which causes breaks in the lining of the rectum, vagina or inside the mouth. (Anal intercourse is particularly dangerous as the rectum is easily damaged during sex causing tears through which the virus can enter the blood-stream.)

- Use of condoms. Condoms act as a barrier. They stop the HIV virus and other venereal diseases (like syphilis, the drop, herpes) from spreading to the uninfected partner. If any creams are used to make the condom slippery (lubricants) they should be water based (eg KY jelly). Grease based lubricants (vaseline, oils) damage the condom and

will allow the virus to pass through them. The use of sperm killing creams with condoms (those containing monoxynol) have been suggested as an extra way of stopping the virus from being passed on but they cannot be used during anal sex as they may harm the rectum.

- Any kind of sex that does not involve the penis entering the vagina or rectum and any sex that does not involve passing on semen, blood, vaginal secretions or urine is of little or no risk (assuming there are no open cuts present).
- Toothbrushes, razors and other things that could get blood on them, should not be shared.



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