



## HIV Overview

### HIV/AIDS: The Basics

(Last updated 9/23/2014; last reviewed 9/23/2014)

#### Key Points

- HIV is the virus that causes HIV infection. AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV infection.
- HIV is spread through contact with the blood, semen, pre-seminal fluid, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids, or breast milk of a person infected with HIV. In the United States, HIV is spread mainly by having anal or vaginal sex or sharing drug injection equipment with a person infected with HIV.
- The use of HIV medicines to treat HIV infection is called antiretroviral therapy (ART). ART involves taking a combination of HIV medicines (called an **HIV regimen**) every day.
- ART can't cure HIV infection, but it can help people infected with HIV live longer, healthier lives. HIV medicines can also reduce the risk of transmission of HIV.

#### What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus, which is the virus that causes HIV infection. The abbreviation "HIV" can refer to the virus and or to HIV infection.

AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV infection.

HIV attacks and destroys the infection-fighting **CD4 cells** of the **immune system**. Loss of CD4 cells makes it difficult for the body to fight infections and certain cancers. Without treatment, HIV gradually destroys the immune system and advances to AIDS.

## How is HIV spread?

HIV is spread through contact with certain body fluids from a person infected with HIV. These body fluids include:

- Blood
- Semen
- Pre-seminal fluid
- Vaginal fluids
- Rectal fluids
- Breast milk

The spread of HIV from person to person is called HIV transmission. The spread of HIV from an HIV-infected woman to her child during pregnancy, childbirth, or breastfeeding is called mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

In the United States, HIV is spread mainly by having sex with or sharing drug injection equipment with someone who is infected with HIV. To reduce your risk of HIV infection, use condoms correctly and consistently during sex, limit your number of sexual partners, and never share drug injection equipment.

Mother-to-child transmission is the most common way that children become infected with HIV. HIV medicines, given to HIV-infected women during pregnancy and childbirth and to their babies after birth, reduce the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV.

You can't get HIV by shaking hands or hugging a person infected with HIV. And you can't get HIV from contact with objects such as dishes, toilet seats, or doorknobs used by a person with HIV.

## What is the treatment for HIV?

The use of HIV medicines to treat HIV infection is called antiretroviral therapy (ART). ART involves taking a combination of HIV medicines (called an **HIV regimen**) every day. (HIV medicines are often called antiretrovirals or ARVs.)

ART prevents HIV from multiplying and reduces the level of HIV in the body. Having less HIV in the body protects the immune system and prevents HIV infection from advancing to AIDS.

ART can't cure HIV, but it can help people infected with HIV live longer, healthier lives. ART also reduces the risk of HIV transmission.

## What are the symptoms of HIV/AIDS?

Soon after infection with HIV, many people have flu-like symptoms, such as fever, headache, or rash. The symptoms may come and go for a month or two after infection.

After this earliest stage of HIV infection, HIV continues to multiply but at very low levels. More severe symptoms of HIV infection, such as chronic diarrhea, rapid weight loss, and other signs of opportunistic infections, generally don't appear for many years. (Opportunistic infections are infections and infection-related cancers that occur more frequently or are more severe in people with weakened immune systems than in people with healthy immune systems.)

Without treatment, HIV can advance to AIDS. The time it takes for HIV to advance to AIDS varies, but it can take 10 years or more.

**HIV transmission is possible at any stage of HIV infection—even if an HIV-infected person has no symptoms of HIV.**

## How is AIDS diagnosed?

The following criteria are used to determine if a person infected with HIV has AIDS:

- The person's immune system is severely damaged as indicated by a CD4 count of less than 200 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>. A CD4 count measures the number of CD4 cells in a sample of blood. The CD4 count of a healthy person ranges from 500 to 1,600 cells/mm<sup>3</sup>.

**AND/OR**

- The person has one or more opportunistic infections.

## How can I learn more about HIV/AIDS?

- [Watch this tutorial on preventing HIV/AIDS.](#)
- [Read this webpage: How Do You Get HIV OR AIDS?](#)

## This fact sheet is based on information from the following sources:

- From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC):

## HIV Basics

- From the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID):  
[Understanding HIV/AIDS](#)