

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV) AND ACQUIRED IMMUNODEFICIENCY SYNDROME (AIDS)

WHAT IS HIV/AIDS?

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is the virus that causes acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). The virus attacks the body's immune system, which is your protection against infections. Once people get HIV, they have it for life. At this time there is no effective cure, however, with proper medical care, HIV can be controlled. People with HIV who get effective HIV treatment can live long, healthy lives and protect their partners.

If HIV is not treated, it can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). AIDS is the last stage of HIV infection. It is a chronic, life-threatening condition caused by the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

SYMPTOMS

- About half of people infected with HIV do not experience any symptoms following infection
- People may experience flu-like symptoms two to four weeks after being infected; this may include fever, headache, sore muscles and joints, stomachache, swollen lymph glands, or a skin rash
- Symptoms usually last less than two weeks, although they can last up to 10 weeks
- Symptoms of infection may be overlooked as they can occur with many minor illnesses

HOW IT IS SPREAD

HIV is spread through exposure to blood and/or body fluids from a person infected with HIV. The most common way to spread HIV is condomless oral, anal, and vaginal sex and in sharing needles or equipment used to inject drugs (including steroids and hormones).

People living with HIV who take anti-retroviral therapy (ART) and who achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load have no risk of transmitting HIV. This is referred to as Undetectable = Untransmissible (U=U).

Taking HIV Pre-exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) is a very effective approach to reduce the risk of HIV infection. An HIV-negative person takes HIV medication daily to reduce their risk of HIV infection. When PrEP is taken as prescribed, it can reduce the chance of contracting HIV by 99 percent.

DIAGNOSIS

A blood test can tell you if you are infected with HIV. It is called the HIV antibody test. A positive blood test result means that you have been infected with HIV and that you can spread it to others. A negative result means that no HIV antibodies were found in your blood. Make sure you speak to your health care provider before and after you have the test as when you test after a risk is important.

Early testing and diagnosis is important for early treatment. If you delay treatment, HIV will continue to harm your immune system. Delaying treatment puts people at higher risk for transmitting HIV to their partners, getting sick themselves, and developing AIDS.

All people with HIV should take HIV treatment, regardless of how long they've had HIV or how healthy they may be. If you are diagnosed with HIV, a health care provider may give you referral to a specialist for treatment.

HELPFUL INFORMATION BEFORE TAKING AN HIV BLOOD TEST

- It can take up to 6 weeks after exposure to HIV for your immune system to make antibodies to HIV
- You may be asked to wait or to retest at least 6 weeks after a possible HIV exposure to make sure your results are accurate
- If you have been infected with HIV, you can infect others even before you have a positive blood test

HIV SELF-TEST KITS AND RAPID TESTING

- HIV self-testing is when an individual collects their own sample, conducts the test, and interprets the result themselves
- The INSTI HIV self-test uses a blood sample from a finger prick; it is a screening test and a reactive (positive) result needs to be confirmed by a laboratory HIV test (this means a blood test is necessary for a diagnosis of HIV to be made by a physician)
- HIV self-tests and rapid point of care (POC) tests may not be accurate until 12 weeks after a risk or potential exposure

PREVENTION

- Use a new condom each time you have sex; this will help protect you against HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STI's)
- Use only water or silicone-based lubricants with condoms; oil-based lubricants can cause condoms to tear
- If you are HIV positive and not on HIV treatment, talk to your health care provider; anti-HIV drugs can protect your health and prevent the transmission of HIV (U=U)
- If you are HIV negative and at high risk of contracting HIV, you may be a good candidate for HIV PrEP (pre -exposure prophylaxis); PrEP is a prevention method and should be started before an exposure to HIV
- Talk to your health care provider to see if PrEP might be right for you; PrEP may be available by prescription from a Sexual Health Clinic physician or another health care provider
- If you are HIV negative and there is a chance you have had a recent exposure to HIV, you may be prescribed post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP); HIV PEP prescription medications should be started as soon as possible (no later than 72 hours after exposure to HIV). HIV PEP medications must be taken every day for 28 days
- PEP may be prescribed from most but not all Emergency Departments or other clinics.
- Avoid sharing sex toys (and if you do, always put a new condom on each toy before using it); it is also important to wash your toys thoroughly between vaginal and anal use.
- Choose oral sex, masturbation, and other kinds of sexual stimulation that pose little or no risk of getting HIV

HIV is a reportable disease. York Region Community and Health Services must be notified so appropriate follow-up can be done.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- sexandu.ca
- [PEP Clinic HQ 790 Bay](#)
- catie.ca
- [The Ontario HIV Treatment Network](#)
- York Region Public Health Sexual Health Clinics **1-800-361-5653, # 1**