

# HIV/AIDS

**HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that damages a person's immune system and weakens their ability to fight everyday infections and diseases. AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is the name used to describe a set of symptoms and illnesses that happen at the final stage of HIV infection when our immune system is severely damaged.**

## KEY FACTS

- HIV continues to be a major global public health issue, having claimed more than 32 million lives so far. However, with increasing access to effective HIV prevention, diagnosis, treatment and care, HIV infection has become a manageable chronic health condition, enabling people living with HIV to lead long and healthy lives.
- There were approximately 38 million people living with HIV at the end of 2018.
- Due to gaps in HIV/AIDS services, 770 000 people died from HIV related causes in 2018 and 1.7 million people were newly infected.
- While AIDS cannot be transmitted from one person to another, the HIV can. HIV is commonly transmitted through sexual contact, from mother to child during birth, delivery and breast-feeding, as well as contact with blood or other body fluids.
- HIV/AIDS does not spread by holding hands, hugging, using common toilets, mosquito bites, coughing, sneezing or sharing crockery and utensils.
- There is no cure for the HIV infection. However, effective antiretroviral drugs (ARVs) can control the virus and help prevent onward transmission to other people.
- The only way to know for sure whether you have HIV is to get tested. Knowing your HIV status gives you powerful information to help you take steps to keep you and your partner(s) healthy.



## HEALTH RISKS

- Unlike some other viruses, the human body cannot get rid of HIV completely, even with treatment. Therefore, once you get HIV, you have it for life.
- HIV targets the immune system and weakens human defence systems against infections and some types of cancer.
- People living with HIV suffer from coinfections. Coinfection is when a person has two or more infections at the same time. Common coinfections for HIV positive people are Hepatitis B, C and Tuberculosis (TB).
- People living with HIV are 19 (15-22) times more likely to develop active TB disease than people without HIV. TB and HIV form a lethal combination, each speeding the other's progress.

## SYMPTOMS

- Though people living with HIV tend to be most infectious in the first few months after being infected, most people do not experience any symptoms when newly infected, that is why it can be difficult to know if someone has HIV.
- Some may experience a flu-like illness such as fever, chills, rash, night sweats, muscle aches, sore throat, fatigue, swollen or mouth ulcers within 2-4 weeks after infection.
- As the infection progressively weakens the immune system, a HIV positive person could develop other signs and symptoms, such as swollen lymph nodes, weight loss, fever, diarrhoea and cough.
- Without treatment, they could also develop severe illnesses such as TB, cryptococcal meningitis, severe bacterial infections, and cancers such as lymphomas and Kaposi's sarcoma.

## TREATMENT

- There is currently no specific treatment for HIV infection.
- The main goal of HIV treatment is to reduce a person's viral load to an undetectable level. An undetectable viral load means that the level of HIV in blood is too low to be detected by a viral load test. People with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of transmitting HIV.
- The treatment for HIV is called antiretroviral therapy (ART). ART therapy, proper medical care and adopting a healthy lifestyle can prevent HIV positive people to develop AIDS.
- ART can dramatically prolong the lives of many people infected with HIV and keep them healthy.

## PREVENTION

- There is currently no vaccine available to prevent HIV infection.
- Testing for HIV is strongly advised for all people exposed to any risk factors. This enables people to learn their HIV status and access necessary prevention and treatment services without delay.
- Safer sex practices, including minimizing the number of partners and correct and consistent use of condoms can protect against transmission.
- Implementation of blood safety strategies is an effective intervention to prevent HIV and other blood borne pathogen like Hepatitis B and C.
- Voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) reduces the risk of heterosexually acquired HIV infection in men by approximately 60%. Since 2007, WHO recommends VMMC as an additional prevention strategy.
- The risk of mother to child transmission can almost be eliminated if both the mother and her baby are provided with Anti retro viral (ARV) drugs as early as possible in pregnancy and during the period of breastfeeding.
- If you think you've been exposed to the virus, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) medication may stop you becoming infected. It should be taken within 72 hours of exposure to HIV to prevent infection. PEP includes counselling, first aid care, HIV testing, and administration of a 28-day course of ARV drugs with follow-up care. WHO recommends PEP use for both occupational and non-occupational exposures, and for adults and children.

As medical advancement is always happening the ITF will periodically update this information, as necessary. You can also keep yourself updated on HIV/AIDS infection from WHO website at:

<https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/hiv-aids>



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