

# HIV/AIDS

HIV (HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS) IS A VIRUS THAT DAMAGES THE CELLS IN YOUR IMMUNE SYSTEM AND WEAKENS YOUR ABILITY TO FIGHT EVERYDAY INFECTIONS AND DISEASE.



**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 THE IMMUNE SYSTEM IS SEVERELY DAMAGED.**

### **Key facts**

- HIV continues to be a major global public health issue, having claimed more than 40 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 38.4 million people living with HIV at the end of 2021.
  - Due to gaps in HIV/AIDS services, in 2021 650,000 people died from HIV-related illnesses and 1.5 million people were newly infected.
  - While AIDS cannot be transmitted from one person to another, HIV can. HIV is commonly transmitted through sexual contact; from mother to child during birth, delivery and breast-feeding; through sharing contaminated needles when injecting drugs or getting a tattoo; and from 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.
  - Seafarers have a greater risk of HIV and sexually transmitted infection because of working and living away from spouses and partners for long periods of time, single sex working and living arrangements, and the availability of sex workers in ports.





## Health risks

- Unlike some 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 co-infections. Co-infection is when a person has two or more infections at the same time. Common co-infections for HIV are hepatitis B and C, and tuberculosis (TB).
- People living with HIV are much 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

- The HIV virus is most infectious in the first few months after infection.
- But many people do not feel symptoms and may not know that they are infected.
- Others may experience influenza-like symptoms, such as fever, headache, rash, and a sore throat.
- As the infection progressively weakens the immune system, a person living with HIV can develop other signs and symptoms, such as swollen lymph nodes, weight loss, fever, diarrhoea, and cough.
- Without treatment, they could also develop serious illnesses such as TB, cryptococcal meningitis, severe bacterial infections, and cancers such as lymphomas and Kaposi's sarcoma.
- Testing for HIV is strongly advised for anyone exposed to any risk factors. This enables people who are HIV positive to access prevention and treatment services without delay.

## Treatment

- While there's no cure for HIV, there are very effective treatments that enable most people with the virus to live a long and healthy life.
- The treatment for HIV is a combination of drugs called antiretroviral therapy (ART), which works by stopping the virus replicating in the body.
- The effectiveness of the treatment is measured by the amount of HIV virus in the blood (viral load). Once the viral load can no longer be measured, it is known as undetectable. Most people taking daily HIV treatment reach an undetectable viral load within six months of starting treatment.
- People with HIV who maintain an undetectable viral load for six months or more effectively have no risk of transmitting HIV.
- ART therapy, proper medical care and adopting a healthy lifestyle can prevent people living with HIV from developing AIDS.

## Prevention

There is currently no vaccine for HIV but there are many effective ways to prevent or reduce the risk of HIV infection:

- Always use a condom during sex.
- Get tested for HIV and sexually transmitted infections (STIs).
- People who inject and use drugs should use harm reduction services to prevent HIV and other blood-borne pathogens, such as hepatitis B and C.
- The risk of mother to child transmission can almost be eliminated if both the mother and her baby are given antiretroviral (ARV) drugs as early as possible in pregnancy and during breastfeeding.
- If you think you've been exposed to HIV, post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP) medication taken within 72 hours may stop you becoming infected. PEP includes counselling, first aid care, HIV testing, and administration of a 28-day course of ARV drugs with follow-up care. The WHO recommends PEP for both occupational and non-occupational exposures, and for adults and children.
- Have a voluntary medical male circumcision (VMMC) – this dramatically reduces the risk of heterosexually acquired HIV infection in men.



**YOU CAN GET IN TOUCH WITH US THROUGH THE ITFWELLBEING FACEBOOK PAGE (ITFWELLBEING) FOR GUIDANCE ON HIV/AIDS, OR KEEP UPDATED VIA THE WHO WEBSITE (WWW.WHO.INT).**

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