

In a short time the AIDS epidemic has become an international health crisis. AIDS is a preventable disease. Unlike some other illnesses, AIDS is transmitted only by identifiable activities. Anyone, regardless of gender, race, age, or sexual orientation who engages in these activities can contract or transmit AIDS. The AIDS epidemic will have an increasing social and economic impact on all of us. The best defense against AIDS is information.

■
AIDS IS A PREVENTABLE DISEASE.

■
AIDS IS NOT CASUALLY CONTAGIOUS.

■
ONLY A QUALIFIED PHYSICIAN
CAN DIAGNOSE AIDS.

■
ANYONE—MALE OR FEMALE, STRAIGHT OR GAY,
OLD OR YOUNG, AND OF ANY RACE—
CAN GET AIDS IF INFECTED THROUGH SEXUAL
CONTACT OR BLOOD-TO-BLOOD TRANSMISSION.

■
PEOPLE WITH AIDS NEED OUR SOCIAL AND
EMOTIONAL SUPPORT.
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AIDS LIFELINE

The best defense
against AIDS is
information.

WHAT IS AIDS?

"AIDS" stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, a disease which breaks down a part of the body's immune system. This breakdown leaves the body vulnerable to a variety of unusual, life-threatening illnesses. It is these diseases, not the AIDS virus itself, which can result in death. AIDS has been fatal in more than 50 percent of the cases. The most common illnesses found in people with AIDS are *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) and Kaposi's sarcoma (KS), a form of skin cancer.

AIDS cases have been documented as early as 1977. Since then, the illness has been diagnosed around the world with increasing frequency. Scientists expect the AIDS epidemic to continue to spread. There is no vaccine against AIDS. Understanding how the virus is spread and learning how to prevent its transmission are the only ways to slow the epidemic.

WHAT CAUSES AIDS?

AIDS is caused by a virus that attacks a particular type of cell in the immune system. This virus is known as HIV. Infection with the AIDS virus does not necessarily result in AIDS or AIDS Related Conditions (ARC). However, the AIDS virus must be present in the system for AIDS to occur. There is a possibility that cofactors such as alcohol or drug abuse, poor nutrition, stress, or other illnesses may play a role in the development of the disease.

IS AIDS CASUALLY CONTAGIOUS?

"No evidence supports AIDS transmission by casual contact, by the airborne route, by objects handled by people with AIDS, or by contaminated environmental surfaces."

James W. Curran, MD, MPH

Director, AIDS Activity, Centers for Disease Control

The medical profession uniformly agrees that you can engage in your usual daily activities, such as working in a group setting, shaking hands, attending public events, eating in restaurants, and swimming in public pools, without any risk of getting AIDS.

HOW IS AIDS DIAGNOSED?

AIDS is diagnosed by finding a life-threatening illness that would not be found in a person with a fully functioning immune system. These illnesses, such as PCP and KS, can only be diagnosed by a physician who performs certain types of tests based on individual symptoms. Other causes of immune system dysfunction, such as chemotherapy or immune-suppressive drugs, must also be ruled out. There is no simple test that can diagnose AIDS.

HOW IS AIDS TRANSMITTED?

AIDS can be transmitted through sexual contact in the same way as other sexually transmitted diseases. AIDS can also be spread through direct blood-to-blood contact, for example by sharing hypodermic needles. A pregnant woman who is infected with the virus may transmit it to her unborn child. Blood transfusions have transmitted the virus, but many experts believe this should no longer occur as a result of screening programs now in use.

In an infected person, the virus may be found in a variety of bodily fluids and secretions including semen, blood, saliva, sweat and tears. However, there is no evidence that saliva, sweat or tears have transmitted the AIDS virus.

HOW CAN I PROTECT MYSELF FROM AIDS?

Anyone who is sexually active can acquire or transmit AIDS through sexual contact. When you are not sure if your sexual partner may be infected with the AIDS virus, use the same precautions as with other sexually transmitted diseases: do not allow semen, blood, urine, feces or vaginal secretions to enter your body. Use condoms for all types of intercourse.

Sharing hypodermic needles has been demonstrated to transmit the AIDS virus among drug users. Do not share needles. Razors and toothbrushes that are shared with an infected person may also transmit the virus because they expose you to minute amounts of blood.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN A PERSON BECOMES INFECTED WITH THE AIDS VIRUS?

Not everyone infected with the virus will actually develop AIDS.

- *Most infected people will develop antibodies to the virus, remain healthy, and display none of the symptoms of AIDS, though they may be able to transmit the virus to others. The long-term effects of infection for this group of people are unknown.*
- *A smaller group of people will develop what is called an AIDS Related Condition (ARC), characterized by mild to severe illnesses.*
- *An even smaller percentage will develop AIDS, indicated by specific life-threatening diseases such as *Pneumocystis carinii* pneumonia (PCP) or Kaposi's sarcoma (KS).*

It can take anywhere from a few months to several years or more after infection for diseases to develop.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF AIDS?

Many symptoms associated with AIDS are also present in common, minor illnesses, such as colds, bronchitis, and stomach flu. However, in AIDS these symptoms are usually persistent or recurrent. With AIDS, the symptoms are signs of diseases which affect people with damaged immune systems. The general symptoms associated with AIDS may include:

- *Unexplained, persistent fatigue.*
- *Unexplained fever, shaking chills, or drenching night sweats lasting longer than several weeks.*
- *Unexplained weight loss greater than 10 pounds.*
- *Swollen glands (enlarged lymph nodes usually in the neck, armpits or groin) which are otherwise unexplained and last more than 2 months.*
- *Pink to purple flat or raised blotches or bumps occurring on or under the skin, inside the mouth, nose, eyelids or rectum. Initially they may resemble bruises but do not disappear. They are usually harder than the skin around them.*
- *Persistent white spots or unusual blemishes in the mouth.*
- *Persistent diarrhea.*
- *Persistent dry cough which has lasted too long to be caused by a common respiratory infection, especially if accompanied by shortness of breath.*

If you have the above symptoms, have your health evaluated by a physician familiar with AIDS.

CAN AIDS BE TREATED?

There is currently no treatment that will destroy the AIDS virus or restore the immune system. Research on antiviral drugs is under way in the United States and other countries. However, people with AIDS are often successfully treated for specific infections and may lead active lives for long periods of time. People with AIDS, like people with other life-threatening illnesses, such as cancer or heart disease, may need extra social and emotional support.