

HIV

Looking after **your** sexual health

HIV

HIV stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. Once someone is infected with HIV the virus will remain in their body for the rest of their life. There is currently no cure for HIV and no vaccine to prevent people from becoming infected. However, treatment can help most people with HIV to live much longer and feel well.

HIV can be transmitted in a number of ways. This booklet is mostly about sexual transmission. It gives you information about HIV, what you can do if you are worried that you might have the infection and advice on how to protect yourself.

If someone is tested and found to be infected with HIV, they are said to be HIV positive.

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What causes HIV?

HIV is a virus. When someone becomes infected with HIV the virus weakens and damages their body's defence system (the immune system) so that it cannot fight off infections.

Someone who has HIV is diagnosed as having AIDS only when their immune system cannot cope and they develop one or more particular illnesses. Most people with HIV, who are taking treatment, will not go on to develop AIDS. The term AIDS is not used very often now. Late stage or advanced HIV infection is used instead.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV can be passed from one person to another through sexual contact, and in a number of other ways. Both men and women can have HIV, and can transmit the virus. You don't need to have lots

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of sexual partners to become HIV positive.

HIV can be transmitted through heterosexual (straight) or homosexual (gay, lesbian) sex. In women who only ever have sex with women the risk of HIV being passed on is very low.

Most people with HIV will look and feel healthy, so you cannot tell who has the virus and you can transmit HIV without knowing you are HIV positive. If someone is taking anti-HIV drugs they can pass on HIV but the risk of this happening is significantly reduced.

HIV is transmitted from one person to another when the blood, semen, pre-ejaculate (precum), vaginal and anal fluids or breast milk of an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person by:

- having unprotected (without a condom) vaginal or anal sex
- sharing sex toys
- using a needle or injecting equipment which has already been used by someone who is infected with HIV.

A woman with HIV can transmit the virus to her baby before or during birth, or by breastfeeding. This risk can be reduced by testing and treatment during pregnancy, planning the delivery and avoiding breastfeeding.

The risk of HIV transmission as a result of unprotected oral sex is low but it can happen. You are more at risk if:

- you are performing oral sex
- your throat or mouth is inflamed or you have cuts, sores, abrasions or any unhealed piercing in your mouth
- your partner ejaculates in your mouth
- you have just brushed or flossed your teeth
- you are giving oral sex to a woman who is having her period.

You cannot become HIV positive from hugging, saliva, kissing, sneezes, coughs, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery. You cannot get HIV from any animals or insects, including mosquitoes. HIV is not passed on through biting.

Can HIV be transmitted when receiving healthcare in the UK?

It is now extremely rare to become infected with HIV when receiving healthcare in the UK. In the UK all health professionals – such as dentists, doctors, midwives and nurses – are required to follow infection control procedures when caring for any patient.

Organ donors and blood from blood donors are also tested in the UK to reduce the risk of HIV being transmitted through infected blood, blood products or donated organs.

Some countries do not have the same standards of medical and dental care as the UK, so there may be a risk of HIV transmission from infected blood products or unsterile medical equipment if you receive healthcare in another country.

What are the signs and symptoms of HIV?

Many people who are living with HIV have no obvious signs and symptoms at all. Recent evidence shows that between 70% to 90% of people who become infected with HIV experience flu-like symptoms within a few weeks after infection.

The most common symptoms are a fever, a rash and a severe sore throat all occurring at the same time. These symptoms in an otherwise healthy person may indicate recent HIV infection.

How will I know if I have HIV?

You can only be certain you are HIV positive if you have a test. If you or a partner think you might have become HIV positive it is important that you don't delay seeking advice and getting a test. Even if you don't have symptoms an HIV test should be considered if:

- you have recently had unprotected sex (without a condom) with a new partner
- a sexual partner tells you they are HIV positive
- you have shared needles or injecting equipment or had a tattoo or piercing without a sterile needle
- you, or your partner, have had unprotected sex (without a condom) with other partners
- you, or your partner, have another sexually transmitted infection
- you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

How soon after transmission can I have a test?

It can take one month after you become infected with HIV for there to be enough antibodies and antigens in your blood to show up on an HIV test.

It is important not to delay getting a test if you think you might have been exposed to the HIV virus. You can have a test even if you do not have any signs and symptoms. You will usually be offered an HIV test when you go to the clinic.

A test can be carried out a month after possible infection but you may need a follow up test to confirm these results.

What is an HIV test?

An HIV test checks your blood for antibodies and antigens to HIV. When HIV enters your body, your

immune system tries to fight off the infection by producing antibodies to the virus.

Cervical screening tests, routine blood tests and swabs do **not** detect HIV. If you are not sure whether you have been tested for HIV, just ask.

What does the test involve?

An HIV test usually involves taking a sample of blood and sending it to a laboratory to be tested.

It is now possible to test for HIV using a saliva sample or a blood-spot (pin-prick to your finger).

An HIV test should only be done with your consent. You should understand what is involved in the test and how it might affect you. If you are tested by a doctor, nurse or health adviser, they should discuss with you:

- the benefits of testing
- how the test result (negative or positive) might affect you and aspects of your life
- how and when the HIV test can be done
- where the information about the test result will be recorded
- how the result will be given to you.

They may also give you a leaflet to explain some of the things you have discussed. Don't be frightened to ask questions about anything you are not sure about.

If you are taking a test at home, ensure you read the information provided with the test in full and, if you have any questions, ring the telephone number included or call the Sexual Health Information Line (see page 14 for details).

Before you decide to have a test you may wish to talk to someone about the implications that this could have on all aspects of your life and about who might have access to the HIV test result. A doctor, nurse, health adviser or an HIV

organisation can help you with this.

How soon will I know the result of the test?

This will vary depending on where you had the test done. The doctor, nurse or health adviser will talk to you about when the result will be available.

At most services the result should be available within a week. Some clinics offer same day testing. Not all clinics provide this service and an appointment is usually required.

There are also a small number of clinics that offer rapid testing. This is when you have an HIV test, and are given the result in a short space of time (often within 20 minutes). If the result is positive another test will be done to check that the result is correct.

Where can I get a test?

There are a number of services you can go to. Choose the service you feel most comfortable with.

An HIV test can be done at:

- a genitourinary medicine (GUM) or sexual health clinic
- your general practice
- some contraception clinics and young people's services
- rapid testing clinics (these are listed at www.tht.org.uk)
- private clinics (for a fee).

Pregnant women attending antenatal services and women attending some gynaecology services will be offered a test.

People who inject drugs may be able to get a test through a local drugs service.

How accurate are the tests?

No tests are 100 per cent accurate, but HIV tests should pick up almost all HIV infections if they are done at the right time. All positive HIV tests are repeated to confirm the result.

Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?

HIV testing is available on the NHS free of charge to anyone.

You can buy home-sampling tests (where you send a saliva sample or blood-spot off to be tested) online and from some pharmacies. After April 2014, it will also be possible to buy self-testing kits (that will allow you to test yourself and find out the results immediately). It is important to check that the test you buy has a CE quality assurance mark and is licensed for sale in the UK.

Anyone living in England is entitled to free HIV treatment on the NHS. HIV treatment is also available on the NHS in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

What is the treatment for HIV?

Once HIV is diagnosed, you will be given a number of tests to monitor the stage of the infection and to show if or when treatment should be started. People with HIV may be supported and treated by their own doctor or by a specialist at an HIV clinic or a GUM clinic. Services may work together to provide specialist care and support.

At the moment there is no cure for HIV or late stage HIV infection, but there are drugs, known as antiretroviral treatment (ART) or combination therapy, that reduce the level of HIV in the blood and prevent or delay the development of late stage HIV infection. Most people with HIV benefit

from these treatments and live longer and have better health than if they had not taken them. There are also treatments available that can help prevent or treat many of the illnesses that people with HIV are more likely to get.

Your doctor or specialist can give you full information about treatment options, side effects and long-term effects of treatment. HIV organisations can also provide this information (see inside back cover).

Treatment can be given to prevent a pregnant woman from transmitting the virus to her baby (see page 13) during pregnancy.

Is there any treatment I can take immediately if I think I have just come into contact with HIV?

If you have had unprotected sex (without a condom) with someone who is HIV positive or engaged in any risk-taking behaviour that could have transmitted HIV in the last three days (72 hours) then taking a short course of anti-HIV drugs may help to prevent infection. This is known as Post Exposure Prophylaxis or PEP. It involves taking a course of anti-HIV drugs for four weeks. It is more effective the sooner you take it.

PEP is usually only recommended if:

- you have had unprotected (without a condom) vaginal or anal sex with someone who is HIV positive
- you have had unprotected (without a condom) anal sex with someone who has a high chance of having HIV and you were the receiving partner.

PEP may be considered if:

- you had oral sex with someone who is HIV positive or is at high risk of having HIV and they

ejaculated in your mouth

- you had unprotected vaginal or anal sex with someone who is at high risk of having HIV
- you are a healthcare professional and have been at risk at work, for example through a needlestick injury.

If you are worried that you have been exposed to HIV within the last 72 hours you can go to a GUM clinic, a sexual health clinic or an accident and emergency (A&E) department. The doctor or nurse will ask you some questions and assess whether or not the treatment will be of benefit to you.

What happens if HIV isn't treated?

Once you have become infected with HIV you will remain infected with the virus for the rest of your life, and will be able to transmit the virus to someone else. There is currently no way of curing the virus or removing it from the body. Every individual will react differently to HIV. If the HIV isn't monitored carefully and treatment given when necessary, it will cause long-term damage, and this will develop into late stage HIV infection (which can lead to death).

Will I know how long I've had HIV?

An HIV antibody test cannot tell you how long you have had the virus. If you have had more than one sexual partner it can be difficult to know which partner transmitted the virus. If you feel upset or angry about having HIV and find it difficult to talk to your partner, family or friends, don't be afraid to discuss how you feel with the staff at the clinic or general practice, or at a support organisation.

Should I tell my partner?

If the test shows that you have HIV then it is very important that your current sexual partner and any other recent partners are also tested. The staff at the clinic or general practice can help you with this, and discuss with you which of your sexual partners may need to be tested.

You may be given a 'contact slip' to send or give to your partner(s) or, with your permission, the clinic can do this for you. The slip explains that they may have been exposed to a sexually transmitted infection and suggests that they go for a check-up. It may or may not say what the infection is. It will not have your name on it, so your confidentiality is protected. This is called partner notification. You are strongly advised to tell your partner(s).

Does anyone else need to know that I have had an HIV test?

Information about your HIV test (whatever the result) should only be disclosed to someone else with your permission. You may be worried that other people may find out that you have HIV when you don't want them to. Talk to the doctor or nurse if you are concerned about the confidentiality of your results.

Does HIV affect fertility?

Many women with HIV are able to become pregnant, and men with HIV can father children.

HIV positive men and women who are planning a pregnancy can get information and advice from an HIV organisation or their doctor or specialist on how to minimise the risk of transmitting HIV to a negative partner or the baby.

What happens if I am pregnant and living with HIV?

If you are HIV positive and you are pregnant it is possible for HIV to be transmitted to the baby while you are pregnant, during the birth and when you breastfeed. During your antenatal care you will be offered an HIV antibody test. If you are HIV positive you can discuss with the doctor or midwife effective ways to manage and support your pregnancy. Almost all babies born to HIV positive women in the UK are negative if the mother is supported through pregnancy.

You can get further information about HIV and pregnancy from HIV organisations (see page 14).

How can I help protect myself from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections?

- Use condoms (male or female) every time you have vaginal or anal sex. If you can, avoid using spermicidally lubricated condoms. The spermicide commonly contains a chemical called Nonoxinal 9 which does not protect against HIV and may even increase the risk of infection. Standard condoms are suitable for anal sex - it's very important that you use a lubricant for anal sex to reduce the risk of the condom tearing.
- If you have oral sex, use a condom to cover the penis, or a latex or polyurethane (soft plastic) square to cover the female genitals or male or female anus. If you do not want to do this, try to avoid:
 - ejaculation into the mouth
 - giving oral sex to a woman during her period
 - oral sex if your throat or mouth is inflamed

or you have cuts, sores or abrasions in your mouth or on your gums

brushing or flossing your teeth before or after oral sex. These may increase your chances of transmitting or getting HIV.

- If you rub your vulva against your partner's vulva one of you should cover the genitals with a latex or polyurethane (soft plastic) square.
- Avoid sharing sex toys. If you do share them, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.
- For more information visit:
HIV aware - www.hivaware.org.uk
NAT – www.nat.org.uk
THT – www.tht.org.uk
- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly visit www.fpa.org.uk/condoms

Where can I get more information and advice?

The Sexual Health Information Line provides confidential advice and information on all aspects of sexual health. The number is 0300 123 7123 and the service is available from Monday to Friday from 9am - 8pm and at weekends from 11am - 4pm.

For additional information on sexual health visit www.fpa.org.uk

Information for young people can be found at www.brook.org.uk

Clinics

To locate your closest clinic you can:

- Use Find a Clinic at www.fpa.org.uk/clinics
- Download FPA's Find a Clinic app for iPhone or Android.

You can find details of general practices and pharmacies in England at www.nhs.uk and in Wales at www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk. In Scotland you can find details of general practices at www.nhs.24.com and in Northern Ireland at www.hscni.net

A final word

This booklet can only give you general information.

The information is based on evidence-based guidance produced by The British Association of Sexual Health and HIV (BASHH) and with assistance from NAT (National AIDS Trust).



talking sense about sex



www.fpa.org.uk

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If you would like the information on the evidence used to produce this booklet or would like to provide us with feedback about this booklet email feedback@fpa.org.uk

