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## Myths about HIV <sup>[1]</sup>

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There are many myths about HIV. A myth is a story or an idea that is not true. In dealing with HIV, it is important to be able to tell reality from myth. Believing myths can result in fear, in

denial, and even in damage to your health.

## Myths about HIV and HIV Treatment

### The Myth: "HIV does not cause AIDS."

**The Reality:** If you do not have HIV, you do not get AIDS. If you have AIDS, you have HIV. Over 20 years of solid scientific proof has verified this. AIDS is not caused by party drugs, AZT, government conspiracies, or anything else but the HIV virus.

### The Myth: "HIV is a death sentence."

**The Reality:** This used to be true. In the 1980s, there were very few treatment options for people living with HIV (HIV+), and many HIV+ people died from AIDS. Thankfully, however, this is no longer the case. We now have more and better HIV drugs. If you stick to your treatment regimen and take good care of your body, there is no reason you can not live a long, full life with HIV.

### The Myth: "There is a cure for HIV/AIDS."

**The Reality:** Unfortunately, there is no universal cure for HIV or AIDS right now. Recent improvements in HIV drugs have made it possible for many HIV+ people to live long, healthy, and full lives. In addition, there have been isolated cases in which someone previously infected with HIV no longer has detectable virus in their system that is able to replicate, or multiply and spread. The Berlin patient is one example ? a man who was diagnosed with HIV in 1995, received an HIV-resistant donor's stem cells for his bone marrow transplant in 2007, and is now reported to be HIV-free. Another example is a toddler from Mississippi who was born with HIV, treated with HIV drugs for 18 months, and then stopped. After five months of not taking any HIV drugs, she was found to have no detectable virus. There is debate about whether either of these people is actually 'cured' of HIV ? only time will tell. Although both cases provide hope and clues for a potential cure, and scientists are working hard to find one, there is no universal cure yet.

### The Myth: "It is not AIDS that kills people; it is the medicines they take!"

**The Reality:** HIV drugs, known as antiretrovirals, do not cure HIV, but they can help keep people healthy for many years. People died from AIDS before antiretrovirals became available. Since combination drug therapy for HIV was begun in 1996, the average life expectancy for people living with HIV in Europe and North America has increased. In addition, death rates for HIV+ people who receive combination antiretroviral treatment have dropped. Unfortunately, the HIV drugs do have side effects [2] (for some people) that can be life-threatening in very rare cases. The good news is that many of the newer HIV medications have fewer side effects and are easier to take.

### The Myth: "Newer HIV drugs are so powerful, it is OK to stop taking them for a while (take a 'drug holiday')."

**The Reality:** Some HIV+ people are tempted to stop taking their HIV drugs for a short time so that they can take a break from the drugs' side effects [2] or from being reminded every day that they are living with HIV. Studies have shown, however, that interrupting your treatment or

taking a 'drug holiday' can cause problems. Stopping your HIV drugs can: (1) give the virus a chance to multiply and cause your viral load [3] to rise, (2) give the virus a chance to develop resistance [4] to your HIV drugs, and (3) cause your CD4 cell count [5] to drop and your immune system [6] to weaken. Several studies have shown that continuing to take your HIV drugs as directed is the way to stay the healthiest the longest.

## Myths about HIV Tests

### The Myth: "The 'AIDS test' cannot be trusted."

**The Reality:** The 'AIDS test' is really an HIV test that measures HIV antibodies, which are special proteins that respond to infection. If you are infected, your immune system will make antibodies against HIV. The HIV antibody test (called ELISA or EIA) is one of the most reliable medical tests. Before a positive antibody test result is reported, it is confirmed by another test called a Western Blot. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the combined accuracy of the antibody test plus the Western Blot is greater than 99 percent. Rapid HIV tests are convenient, because they give results in about 20 minutes. However, positive results from rapid tests are preliminary and need to be confirmed by a Western Blot. For more information on what HIV test is right for you, see our article on HIV testing [7].

### The Myth: "Viral load tests do not really tell anything about a person's health."

**The Reality:** Viral load [3] measures the amount of HIV in a person's blood. Many studies have shown that people with high viral loads are much more likely to become ill or die than those with low viral loads. They also give us important information about how well HIV drugs are working.

## Myths about HIV Transmission

### The Myth: "People with HIV or AIDS look sick."

**The Reality:** Often, people who are infected with HIV do not look or feel sick. Many times, they do not even know they are infected. Taking an HIV test is the only sure way of knowing if you or someone else is infected with HIV.

### The Myth: "Straight people do not get HIV."

**The Reality:** The majority of HIV+ people worldwide are straight (heterosexual). Men infect women, and women infect men. Risk is not about labels or categories of people. Any person who has unprotected sex or shares drug equipment with someone who is HIV+ or whose HIV status is not definitely known is at risk for HIV.

### The Myth: "I am safe because I am in a monogamous relationship (or married)."

**The Reality:** Because HIV+ people often do not 'look sick,' it is important to know your partner's HIV status before having unprotected sex. In an ideal world, if you and your partner

remained monogamous and tested negative for HIV after the 3-month window since your last possible exposures, unprotected sex would be safe. However, if your partner was HIV+ before you met, if he or she is having sex outside the relationship, or if your sexually faithful partner is injecting drugs and sharing needles or drug equipment, you are at risk for getting HIV. Please do not confuse love or commitment with safety. If you do not know your partner's status, and cannot use condoms [8], you may want to consider taking PrEP [9], or Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis. This means taking HIV drugs while you are HIV-negative to reduce the chances that you will get HIV if you are exposed to it.

### **The Myth: "If I am over 50 years old, I am too old to get HIV; HIV is not a disease that affects my generation."**

**The Reality:** Age does not protect you from becoming infected with HIV. In fact, people over 50 years old are getting HIV at an increasing rate and are estimated to represent half of all HIV+ Americans by 2015. Unfortunately, older adults are frequently ignored in discussions about HIV prevention and care and so are not aware that they are at risk. For more information, see The Well Project's article, Older Women: At Risk for HIV [10].

### **The Myth: "If I am using birth control, I cannot get HIV."**

**The Reality:** HIV can be spread during any unsafe or unprotected sex. Most forms of birth control [11] ONLY protect against unwanted pregnancy, NOT sexually transmitted diseases [12] (STDs) like HIV. The only birth control method that prevents pregnancy AND significantly reduces the risk of getting HIV is the condom. For tips on how to make your sex safer, see The Well Project's article on Safer Sex [13].

### **The Myth: "I am safe because I am a virgin."**

**The Reality:** If you have had no sexual contact at all, you are not at risk of getting HIV from sex. If you have had no sexual contact but have shared needles or drug equipment while using drugs, you are at risk. If you have had oral or anal sex, but consider yourself a 'virgin' because you have not had vaginal sex, you are still at risk. To learn more about the risks of different sexual activities, see The Well Project's article on Safer Sex [13].

### **The Myth: "Lesbians do not get HIV."**

**The Reality:** Women who only ever had sex with women are generally at much lower risk for getting any sexually transmitted disease. But in rare cases, they can still get HIV. Multiple reports tell of lesbians who have been infected through sharing sex toys with an HIV+ woman. Also, many women who consider themselves lesbians have had sex with men, and can get infected that way. Lesbians who use drugs and share drug injection equipment can get HIV from a needle or syringe that has been used by someone who is HIV+.

### **The Myth: "HIV can be spread through tears, sweat, mosquitoes, pools, or casual contact."**

**The Reality:** HIV is only transmitted <sup>[14]</sup> through infected blood, semen (pre-cum and cum), vaginal fluids, and breast milk. The most common ways for HIV to be transmitted are through unprotected sexual contact and/or sharing drug equipment with an HIV+ person. HIV can also be passed from mother to baby during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding.

**The Myth: "I can not have a baby because I have HIV."**

**The Reality:** With proper health care and HIV drugs, HIV+ women can have healthy pregnancies. There are many things you can do to prevent spreading HIV to your partner and your baby. Advances in HIV treatment have greatly lowered the chances that a mother will pass HIV on to her baby. If the mother takes HIV drugs as prescribed, the chances of spreading HIV to the baby can be less than one in 50. For more information, see The Well Project's articles, [Pregnancy and HIV](#) <sup>[15]</sup> and [Getting Pregnant and HIV](#) <sup>[16]</sup>.

**The Myth: "It is OK to have unprotected sex if both partners have HIV."**

**The Reality:** Unprotected sex between two HIV+ people can lead one or both of them to be infected with a different strain or type of HIV. This is often called reinfection or superinfection. This can happen even when the partner you are with now is the person who originally infected you with HIV. HIV changes differently in each person's body over time. So the strain your partner had originally may not be the strain he or she has now. Different strains of HIV can be [drug-resistant](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, which makes it hard for your treatment to work and for you to stay healthy. Practicing [safer sex](#) <sup>[13]</sup> protects you from reinfection and infection with other STDs.

## Myths about Clinical Trials

**The Myth: "Clinical trials are unsafe. If I enroll in a study, I will not be allowed to leave it if I do not like it."**

**The Reality:** You are always in control. You can quit any study you participate in at any time for any reason. Some people have heard about the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, which was conducted before the government established strong ethical guidelines for how clinical trials should be done. The US government now has strict rules and regulations that all government and drug company researchers must follow to protect participants in clinical trials. Clinical trials in other countries are subject to the rules and regulations set up by their countries' governments. In addition, all countries are subject to the rules set forth in the International Guidelines for Biomedical Research Involving Human Subjects, which is developed by the Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences (CIOMS) in collaboration with the World Health Organization (WHO). For more information, see The Well Project's articles on [clinical trials](#) <sup>[17]</sup>.

## Get the Facts!

Myths about HIV are very harmful. They can cause you to be afraid of something that is not dangerous. And they can make you feel like something is not dangerous when it really is!

Be sure to learn the truth and get the facts right. Sometimes seemingly well-informed or well-meaning people give out wrong information. If you have a question about HIV, talk to your

health care provider, your local AIDS organization, or the CDC National AIDS Hotline at 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636). If you are outside the US, try finding resources in your area who can answer your questions by using [AIDSmap's e-atlas](#) [18].

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## Additional Resources

Select the links below for additional material related to myths and misperceptions about HIV.

[10 Tired Myths about HIV/AIDS \(Ebony\)](#) [36]

[HIV Can Spread Through Sexual Contact Between Women \(NPR\)](#) [37]

[Myths about HIV/AIDS \(womenshealth.gov\)](#) [38]

[AIDS Myths and Misunderstandings \(AIDSInfoNet\)](#) [39]

[Debunking denialist myths \(AIDStruth.org\)](#) [40]

[10 Harmful Myths about HIV/AIDS \(The Body\)](#) [41]

[Myth: HIV/AIDS Rate Among Black Women Traced To 'Down Low' Black Men \(NPR\)](#) [42]

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- [37] <http://www.npr.org/blogs/health/2014/03/13/289785165/hiv-can-spread-through-sexual-contact-between-women>
- [38] <http://www.womenshealth.gov/hiv-aids/what-is-hiv-aids/myths-about-hiv-aids.html>
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