What Are HIV & AIDS?

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Together, we can change the course of the HIV epidemic...one woman at a time.

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What Is HIV?

HIV stands for: Human Immunodeficiency Virus

HIV is the virus that causes AIDS, but not everyone who is living with HIV has AIDS, or will ever have AIDS.

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How Does HIV Affect a Person’s Body?

- Your immune system is your body's defense system
- While many viruses can be controlled by the immune system, HIV infects the same immune system cells (CD4 cells, or “T-cells”) that usually protect us from germs and illnesses
- Without medication to control the virus, HIV eventually takes over CD4 cells, turning them into factories that produce thousands of HIV copies
- As the virus makes copies, it damages or kills the CD4 cells, weakening the immune system’s ability to protect the body
- This is how HIV causes AIDS
What Is AIDS?

AIDS stands for **Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome**

In the official definition, AIDS is the most advanced stage of HIV

- When the immune system loses too many CD4 cells, you are less able to fight off illness and can develop serious, often deadly, infections (called opportunistic infections or OIs)
- “AIDS” refers to the weakened state of the body’s immune system.
- However, today many people can have an AIDS diagnosis but be very healthy and at low risk of OIs.

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What Is the Difference Between HIV and AIDS?

• Definition of AIDS was established before there was effective treatment for HIV. It indicated that a person was at higher risk of illness or death. It is no longer as relevant, because:
  – Effective treatment means people can stay healthier with low CD4 counts
  – Someone’s immune system may have recovered after an AIDS diagnosis years ago, but their diagnosis may remain

• Someone has AIDS if (s)he is living with HIV and has:
  – At least one “AIDS-defining condition” (from a list of OIs, cancers, conditions whose presence shows the immune system has become weakened) and/or
  – A CD4 cell count of 200 cells or fewer (normal CD4 count = 500 - 1,500)

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What Is the Difference Between HIV and AIDS?

• You do not have AIDS as soon as you acquire HIV
• People can live with HIV for many years with no signs of disease, or only mild-to-moderate symptoms
• In most people, **without treatment**, HIV will eventually wear down the immune system: CD4 levels will fall and OIs will develop
  – At that point, they are considered to have AIDS
  – Starting treatment can still improve their health and lower their risk for illness
• AIDS diagnosis may remain despite treated OI or higher CD4 count
  – Doesn’t mean person is sick or will get sick
  – Just public health system’s way of counting
How Do I Know if I Have HIV?

• Most people can't tell they've acquired HIV
• When HIV enters a person’s body, symptoms may show up within 2-4 weeks (fever, swollen glands, muscle aches, headache, rash)
  – Symptoms occur as a person’s body begins to make HIV antibodies (special proteins that mark HIV for destruction by the immune system)
  – This time period is called the “window period”
• Some people don’t have any symptoms, don’t notice them because they are mild, or believe they have a cold or the flu
• The only way for someone to know for sure if they’ve acquired HIV is to have an HIV test

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Do I Need to Get Tested for HIV?

- U.S. guidelines recommend everyone age 13-64 be screened for HIV at least once
- Anyone who answers “yes” to any of these questions should also be tested:
  - Have you ever had penis into vagina or penis into anus ("butt") sex, or oral sex without a condom or other latex barrier (e.g., dental dam)? Note: oral sex is a low risk activity. Vaginal and anal sex are much higher risk.
  - Do you not know your partner’s HIV status or is your partner living with HIV?
  - Are you pregnant or considering becoming pregnant?
  - Have you ever had a sexually transmitted infection or disease (STI or STD)?
  - Do you have hepatitis C (HCV)?
  - Have you ever shared needles, syringes, or other equipment to inject drugs (including steroids or hormones)?
Why Should I Get Tested?

• If HIV negative, you can stop worrying about exposure
  – Consider taking PrEP or PEP to prevent HIV acquisition
• If HIV+, take effective medications to stay healthy.
• If you plan to become pregnant, HIV testing very important
  – Certain HIV drugs can lower the chance of passing the virus to the baby
What Tests Are Available?

• If you’ve acquired HIV, your immune system will make antibodies against the virus
• The most common HIV tests look for these antibodies in your blood, urine, or oral fluid (not your saliva)
• A test will be able to detect these antibodies after 3-6 months
• The period between HIV acquisition and your body’s production of antibodies is called the “window period”

A negative HIV test after the window period means you do not have HIV from activities conducted before the window period.

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What Tests Are Available?

• If you have some symptoms of initial/acute HIV, and want to get tested before the window period (before your body has a chance to make antibodies), you can get tested for HIV antigens.

• Antigens: pieces of HIV virus or viral particles

• HIV antigen tests can identify HIV acquisition as soon as two weeks after exposure to HIV
Where Can I Get Tested?

• You can get an HIV test at a health clinic, private health care provider’s office, HIV testing center, or health department

• In the US: use [HIV.gov](http://HIV.gov) service locator to find sites

• You can also order HIV tests online or buy them over the counter (without a prescription) at pharmacies
  
  – This allows you to collect a sample or complete a full rapid test (20 minutes) in the privacy of your home
How Is HIV Spread?

- HIV is spread through contact with these body fluids:
  - Blood (including menstrual blood)
  - Semen ("cum") and other male sexual fluids ("pre-cum")
  - Vaginal fluids
  - Breast milk

- Most commonly spread from person to person through unprotected sex (no condoms, treatment-as-prevention methods, or other barriers used), sharing needles used for injecting drugs, hormones or steroids and mother-to-child (during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding)

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How Is HIV Spread?

• HIV is NOT spread through contact with these body fluids:
  – Sweat
  – Tears
  – Saliva (spit)
  – Feces (poop)
  – Urine (pee)

• You CANNOT get HIV by:
  – touching or hugging someone who is living with HIV
  – kissing someone living with HIV
  – using a toilet also used by someone living with HIV
Is There a Vaccine to Prevent HIV?

There is neither a vaccine nor a cure for HIV.

To prevent HIV, use consistent prevention methods:

• Safer sex: choose low- or no-risk activities, use condoms, take HIV drugs (if living with HIV) or PrEP (if HIV-negative)

• Sterile needles (for drugs, hormones, or tattoos)

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• To learn more, please read the full fact sheet on this topic:
  – What Are HIV & AIDS?

• For more fact sheets and to connect to our community of women living with HIV, visit:
  – www.thewellproject.org
  – www.facebook.com/thewellproject
  – www.twitter.com/thewellproject