What Are HIV & AIDS?

Last updated: June 28, 2022

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

#onewomanatatime

www.thewellproject.org

#thewellproject
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.
How Does HIV Affect a Person’s Body?

• Your immune system is your body's defense system
• While the immune system can control many viruses, HIV infects the same immune system cells (CD4 cells, a type of T-cells) that protect us from germs and illnesses
• Without medication to control the virus, HIV usually takes over CD4 cells and turns them into factories that produce millions of copies of the virus
• As the virus makes copies, it damages or kills the CD4 cells, weakening the immune system
• This is how HIV causes AIDS

www.thewellproject.org
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, the body is less able to fight off infections 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.

www.thewellproject.org
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:
  – Where available, 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 specific list) and/or
  – A CD4 cell count of 200 cells or fewer (normal CD4 count = 500 -1,500)
What Is the Difference Between HIV and AIDS?

- You do not have AIDS as soon as you acquire HIV.
- You 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.

www.thewellproject.org
How Do I Know if I Have HIV?

- 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
  - It takes 1-3 months for the antibodies to develop. This 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

www.thewellproject.org
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 a penis inserted into your vagina or anus ("butt"), 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)?

www.thewellproject.org
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 on effective meds, can’t transmit HIV sexually (U=U)

• If you plan to become pregnant, HIV testing very important
  – Certain HIV drugs can lower the chance of passing the virus to the baby

www.thewellproject.org
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 things you did before the window period.
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
• In the US and UK, combined antibody-antigen tests are common. They can detect HIV around 3 weeks after exposure.
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 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.

www.thewellproject.org
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)
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)
• 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