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# 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

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# What Is HIV?



HIV stands for: **H**uman  
**I**mmunodeficiency **V**irus

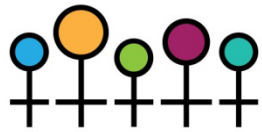
HIV is the virus that causes  
AIDS, but not everyone  
who is living with HIV has  
AIDS, or will ever have  
AIDS.



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# How Does HIV Affect a Person's Body?

- **Your immune system is your body's defense system**
- While 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**



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# What Is AIDS?

AIDS stands for

**A**cquired

**I**mmune

**D**eficiency

**S**yndrome

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

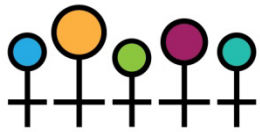
- When the immune system loses too many CD4 cells, the body is less able to fight off infections and can develop serious, often deadly, infections (called opportunistic infections or OIs)
- “AIDS” refers to the weakened state of the body’s immune system.
- **However, today many people can have an AIDS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



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# What Is the Difference Between HIV and AIDS?

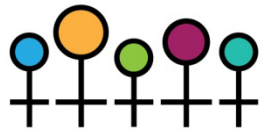
- Definition of AIDS was established **before** there was effective treatment for HIV. It indicated that a person was at higher risk of illness or death. It is no longer as relevant, because:
  - Where available, effective treatment means people can stay healthier with low CD4 counts
  - Someone's immune 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)



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# What Is the Difference Between HIV and AIDS?

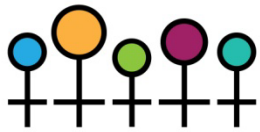
- You do not have AIDS as soon as you acquire HIV
- You can live with HIV for many years with no signs of disease, or only mild-to-moderate symptoms
- In most people, **without treatment**, HIV will eventually wear down the immune system: CD4 levels will fall and OIs will develop
  - At that point, they 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



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# 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**



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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 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)?

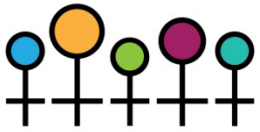




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# Why Should I Get Tested?

- 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



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# 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"

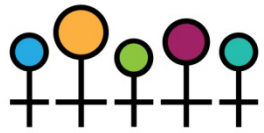
**A negative HIV test after the window period means you do not have HIV from things you did before the window period.**



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# What Tests Are Available?

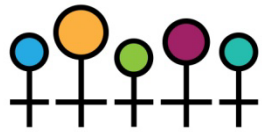
- If you have some symptoms of initial/acute HIV, and want to get tested before the window period (before your body has a chance to make antibodies), you can get tested for HIV antigens.
- Antigens: pieces of HIV virus or viral particles
- In the US and UK, combined antibody-antigen tests are common. They can detect HIV around 3 weeks after exposure.



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# Where Can I Get Tested?

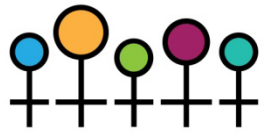
- You can get an HIV test at a health clinic, private health care provider's office, HIV testing center, or health department
- In the US: use [HIV.gov](https://www.hiv.gov) service locator to find sites
- You can also order HIV tests online or buy them over the counter (without a prescription) at pharmacies
  - This allows you to collect a sample or complete a full rapid test (20 minutes) in the privacy of your home



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# How Is HIV Spread?

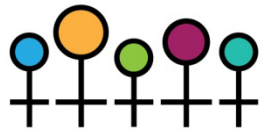
- HIV is spread through contact with these body fluids:
  - Blood (including menstrual blood)
  - Semen (“cum”) and other male sexual fluids (“pre-cum”)
  - Vaginal fluids
  - Breast milk
- Most commonly spread from person to person through unprotected sex (no condoms, treatment-as-prevention methods, 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



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# 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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## Learn More!

- 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](http://www.thewellproject.org)
  - [www.facebook.com/thewellproject](https://www.facebook.com/thewellproject)
  - [www.twitter.com/thewellproject](https://www.twitter.com/thewellproject)