

English / Enska

Facts about HIV and AIDS





AIDS is a serious disease which has spread all over the world since the beginning of the nineteen eighties. AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV and is transmitted from one person to another under certain conditions.

What is HIV?

HIV (*Human Immunodeficiency Virus*) is a virus which is passed on by individuals through semen, vaginal secretion and blood, and which over a longer period of time will destroy the immune system* of the body. Persons with HIV normally do not become ill during the initial years after having been infected but gradually the virus will defeat the defense mechanism of the body and destroy the immune system.

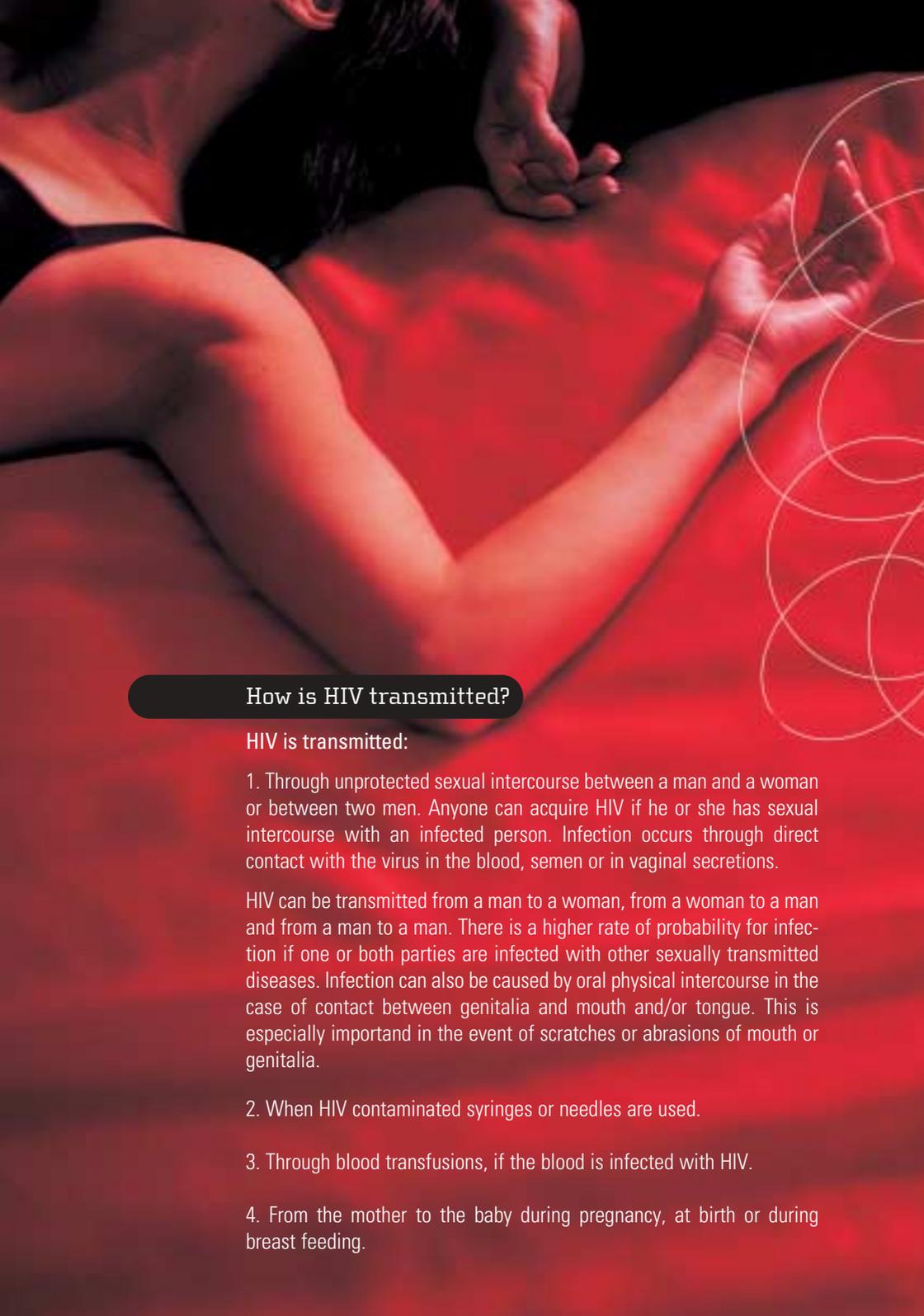


Those infected with HIV carry the virus in their body and can infect others for the rest of their lives.

What is AIDS?

The most serious stage of the disease is called AIDS (*Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome*). Persons infected with HIV will develop AIDS when the bodies immune system has become weakened to such an extent that it can no longer fight against infections acquired from various microorganisms (pathogens)*. AIDS develops gradually in persons with HIV if they do not receive medical treatment. Normally there is an interval of 8-10 years between infection and the development of AIDS, this interval is however variable and treatment with drugs will prolong this period considerably.

* Word definitions are provided on the back page of the brochure



How is HIV transmitted?

HIV is transmitted:

1. Through unprotected sexual intercourse between a man and a woman or between two men. Anyone can acquire HIV if he or she has sexual intercourse with an infected person. Infection occurs through direct contact with the virus in the blood, semen or in vaginal secretions.

HIV can be transmitted from a man to a woman, from a woman to a man and from a man to a man. There is a higher rate of probability for infection if one or both parties are infected with other sexually transmitted diseases. Infection can also be caused by oral physical intercourse in the case of contact between genitalia and mouth and/or tongue. This is especially important in the event of scratches or abrasions of mouth or genitalia.

2. When HIV contaminated syringes or needles are used.

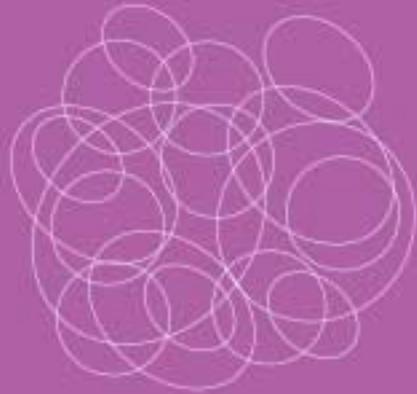
3. Through blood transfusions, if the blood is infected with HIV.

4. From the mother to the baby during pregnancy, at birth or during breast feeding.



HIV is not spread

By everyday contact.
Through healthy skin.
By air and water.
By insect bites.
Through food and drink.
By crockery and such.
Through bed linen, towels and such.
From toilet seats or tubs.
By kissing.
By sneezing and coughing.
By sweat.
By snot and tears.
By a handshake.



In Iceland there is no reason to fear HIV infection in hospitals, from physicians or in health care centres, whether you are donating blood or receiving a blood transfusion. All blood is screened for HIV and syringes and needles are disinfected and for single use only.

How can infection be avoided?

The most effective protection against HIV is a condom. A condom may also prevent other sexually transmitted diseases, e.g. herpes, genital warts, chlamydia and gonorrhoea, and is an effective contraceptive. A condom is also to be used in oral sexual intercourse. It is important to follow closely instructions for the use of a condom



Oral contraceptives and an intrauterine contraceptive device are contraceptives only, and do not provide protection against sexually transmitted diseases.

Intravenous drug users must avoid sharing syringes and needles.

Medical treatment of pregnant women with HIV will significantly reduce the risk of infection of the child during pregnancy and birth. In order to prevent such infection it is important that the mother undergoes regular monitoring.

Treatment

No vaccine against HIV exists, and no other drugs exist that will destroy the virus in the body. Therefore the disease cannot be cured.

However there are drugs that suppress the reproduction of the virus in the bloodstream. The drugs protect the immune system of the body by reducing the amount of virus particles in the body. The drug treatment slows the HIV infection, reduces the risk of transmitting the disease, prolongs the life and improves the quality of life of those infected. Those who become infected with HIV and therefore have a weakened immune system will suffer from common infections but there are drugs for their treatment.

It is important to diagnose HIV as early as possible so that the appropriate medical treatment may be initiated as soon as it becomes necessary. The use of drugs against HIV requires regular monitoring by a physician. All who are diagnosed as HIV infected will have access to such monitoring including professional counseling and treatment by specialists. Treatment, tests and medication for HIV infected persons is free of charge to the patients.

Although effective drug treatment against HIV infection has now been established patients are still being diagnosed with AIDS and patients are still dying from the disease. Some patients are not able to tolerate the drugs during treatment, and others do not react to the drugs because the virus has developed immunity against the drugs. The drug therapy is life long, and very difficult to go through for many patients. Treatment is likewise very expensive for society. Preventive measures are therefore necessary at all times.

In addition to drug treatment the lifestyle of persons infected with HIV affects the progress of the disease. The disposition and the attitude of the HIV positive person towards the disease and his own circumstances is very important, and furthermore it is very important that good cooperation is established between the HIV positive person and healthcare personnel attending him. This way the prospects are increased that people with HIV can enjoy good health for many years.



HIV test for antibodies

After infection the body forms antibodies* against the virus. However these antibodies cannot destroy the virus in the body but are of use when diagnosing the infection. Antibodies are not present in the blood until 3-6 weeks after infection. In order to diagnose the antibodies a blood sample is taken from the arm and within one week you can get the results of the blood test. If the blood test is positive an extra blood sample is needed for confirmation.

Anyone is free to get an HIV test for antibodies. This also implies that nobody will be subjected without cause to a blood test against his will, and anyone who gets a blood test must receive information as to what is involved in such a test. Pregnant women are offered such tests during prenatal check ups. Normally when applying for a residence permit HIV tests for antibodies are not required since the processing of such applications is not linked to an HIV diagnose.

Anyone who thinks that he may have acquired HIV should get such a blood test. It is free of charge and can be administered at any doctor's office. The results of an HIV test are always handled with the utmost confidentiality.

You can be tested for antibodies at the following locations:

- Health care centres in Iceland
- Department for skin disease and sexually transmitted diseases Landspítali-Haskólasjúkrahús (LSH), Þverholt 18, 105 Reykjavík, telephone: 5436050 (By appointment)
- Outpatient ward for infectious diseases LSH, Fossvogur, 108 Reykjavík, telephone: 543 2040 (By appointment)
- LSH Laboratory, Fossvogur, telephone: 543 5600. You can get a test without an appointment any weekday between 8:00 and 18:00 hours.

* Word definitions are provided on the back page of the brochure



When HIV antibodies are not present.

If HIV antibodies are not present in a person that person is probably not infected by HIV. An infected person may however not have antibodies during the first weeks following infection and in that event a test for antibodies is of no use. Therefore it is advisable to repeat the test in 3-4 months.

It is important to keep in mind that even if antibodies have not formed in the blood of an infected person he still can infect others.

A negative test result is no assurance that it is not possible to become infected later. Unsafe behavior should therefore be avoided: A condom should be used and never share syringes and needles should never be shared.

When HIV antibodies are present

In the event that antibodies are present you have confirmation on infection with HIV. Although the body forms antibodies against the virus the antibodies will not be able to suppress the virus, therefore a person with the disease will be able to infect others.

When antibodies are present the infected person is sent to a physician who is a specialist in infectious diseases. At the physician's office you will be able to get answers to the questions that arise and he can give advice as to how it is best to conduct your life with HIV. The social worker for the HIV positive will also provide information, counseling and support.

Most people will be able to continue to perform their work or studies the way they have done before they were diagnosed with HIV. In certain areas of life it is however necessary to make changes. One of the most important changes is that you must continuously be cautious not to infect others. Another change is related to your relationship with the health system, which will be significantly increased because of regular monitoring, therefore close cooperation with the physician is important.





The consequences of the AIDS epidemic

Iceland

By the year 2003 a total of 161 persons had been diagnosed with HIV in Iceland since the epidemic was first detected over two decades ago. In total 53 persons have been diagnosed with AIDS and 36 have died from the disease. Beginning in 1993 there was an increase in the annual number of persons who became infected but since 1996 the number of those diagnosed with AIDS and those who die from the disease, has gone down. This is due to drug treatment which in most cases can curb the disease.

In recent years the majority of those diagnosed have been heterosexual. This is contrary to the situation during the onset of the epidemic when most of the infected were homosexual men considered to have been infected through sexual intercourse.

The majority of those diagnosed with infection are 25 - 29 years old. The majority of those who have been diagnosed with AIDS are 35 - 39 years old.

Worldwide

Globally HIV and AIDS is a much greater problem than in Iceland. During the past twenty years over 60 million people have been infected with HIV throughout the world. It was estimated by the beginning of the year 2003 that 42 million men, women and children now alive are infected with HIV or AIDS, and that over 20 million have died from the disease. This means that 1.2% of the inhabitants of the earth aged 15 years and older are infected with HIV and AIDS. It is estimated that only 10 - 20% of those infected know that they carry the virus.

In 2002 a total of 5 million people in the world became infected and over 3 million died from AIDS. Never before have so many died in a single year from this disease. In some parts of the world AIDS is among the most common causes of death. The average life span of people in some countries has therefore lowered by about 10 years.

Over 70% of adults and children infected with HIV in the world live in Africa. The highest infection rate is however in South-East Asia and in the former Soviet Union. AIDS is not only a great health problem in the world but the disease has at the same time also caused significant social upheaval and economic regression. HIV infection is most common among young people and therefore it has an extensive effect on the segment of society that is most actively involved in the production and the economy of each nation. Poverty is spreading and increasing as a result of the epidemic in many areas around the world.

Prejudice acts against preventive measures.

Word definitions.

Antibodies

Material produced by the body to destroy microorganisms (pathogens) that enter the body. The body forms its own antibodies in response to each singular microorganism (pathogen). It forms e.g. its own antibodies against HIV.

Immune system

The protective system of the body against bacteria, viruses and fungi. The immune system protects us against all infectious agents we come into contact with.

Infection

A disease caused by microorganisms (pathogens).

Pathogens

Bacteria, viruses or fungi that cause diseases. They can enter the body through the air we breathe, through food and drink, through physical contact and sexual intercourse or through blood.





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