What are HIV and AIDS? HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system, eventually making it too weak to protect the body from otherwise treatable illnesses. When a person is infected with HIV the virus can attack the immune system, gradually weakening it and making the body more susceptible to other diseases. If left untreated HIV can lead to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome), a life-threatening condition.

Historically the epidemic has been described as a pandemic affecting men who have sex with men and intravenous drug users, but in recent years there has been significant transmission among heterosexuals and through pregnant women to newborns. Today the epidemic also affects many other populations, including children and women.

Learning where you stand is important because the earlier in your life you learn your status, the more likely you are to take steps to stop transmission.

Key decisions that you may choose to talk about with a trusted friend or counselor include:

- Who might you tell about your status?
- How will you tell them?
- Who can encourage and support you?
- How can you learn more about the disease and how to avoid transmitting it to others?
- How can you stay healthy and take care of your body and mind?
- What are the treatment options in your area?
- Are there support groups or other associations where you could seek help?

Get Involved!

SASA! is a movement in your community for preventing violence against women and HIV. It involves many community members working together for positive change.

www.raisingvoices.org/sasa.php

Living Positively

It is very challenging to receive an HIV positive test. Everyone will react to and handle his/her HIV positive status differently. Remember that many people are HIV positive, and they continue to live happy and healthy lives.

www.raisingvoices.org/sasa.php
What is the effect of HIV on the immune system?

Your immune system is your body’s defense system against infections. HIV attacks specific cells (CD4-positive cells) in the immune system. When HIV enters these cells, they begin to produce viruses. The virus is then passed on to another cell, where it begins to replicate. Over time, the virus can weaken the immune system, making it more difficult for the body to fight off infections. If the immune system is weakened enough, the person may develop life-threatening infections and cancers.

What are the symptoms of HIV and of AIDS?

A person with HIV does not have symptoms. Symptoms do not develop for many years after infection. However, if you test positive for HIV, it is important to know that you may have HIV even if you don’t have any symptoms.

AIDS symptoms are related to whatever AIDS-related illnesses you have. If you have AIDS, it is important to know that you may have HIV even if you don’t have any symptoms.

Testing for HIV

The only sure way to know your HIV status is by getting an HIV test. Many people are not aware of their HIV status because they do not have any symptoms. However, if you test positive for HIV, it is important to know that you may have HIV even if you don’t have any symptoms.

In many places now, the results of an HIV test are available that same day. A counselor will talk with you before and after testing. Although an HIV test can cause anxiety, it is often better to know one’s status.

Women’s Special Vulnerability to HIV Infection

• Unequal power relationships between women and men mean that many women are unable to make decisions about their bodies or sexuality that could protect them from infection.

• Social expectations or gender roles women expect to play limit their access to information and choices about sex, sexuality, reproductive health and HIV/AIDS.

• Early marriage increases the risk for HIV, because many young girls are married to older men who have more sexual experience and are more likely to be HIV infected.

• Young girls who are sexually abused often take part in high-risk sexual behaviors like having many partners and not using condoms.

• Discontinuing breast-feeding as soon as baby can handle other sources of food reduces but does not eliminate risk.

• Maintaining consistent breast-feeding (i.e., not mixed feeding) during the first months of the baby’s life reduces but does not eliminate risk.

• Performing a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible, during birth may help reduce transmission.

• Blood-to-blood contact Avoiding contact with others’ blood when possible, or wearing gloves.

• Oral sex Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex.

• Anal sex Using male condoms properly every time.

• Formula feeding, ONLY if the family can afford it throughout AND safe water will be used.

• Discontinuing breast-feeding as soon as baby can handle other sources of food.

• Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex.

Through pregnancy

• Continuing ARV treatment if the mother is at the point of needing the treatment, or, following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection.

• During birth

• If continuing ARV treatment, the mother will either:

  • Take a short course of ARV treatment for the baby.

  • Perform a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

Through breast milk?

• Performing a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

• Following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection.

• Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex.

• Anal sex Using male condoms properly every time.

• Oral sex Using a condom on the penis during oral sex on a man.

• Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex on a woman.

From an infected mother to her child, including:

• From an infected mother to her child, including:

  • Taking a short course of ARV treatment for mother and baby may help reduce transmission.

  • During birth

  • Continuing ARV treatment if the mother is at the point of requiring the treatment; or,

    • Performing a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

• Oral sex Using a condom on the penis during oral sex on a man.

• Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex on a woman.

• Through breast milk?

• Performing a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

• Following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection.

• Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex.

• Anal sex Using male condoms properly every time.

• Oral sex Using a condom on the penis during oral sex on a man.

• Using a rubber barrier (like a female condom) between the mouth and vagina during oral sex on a woman.

• Through pregnancy

• Continuing ARV treatment if the mother is at the point of needing the treatment, or, following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection.

• During birth

• If continuing ARV treatment, the mother will either:

  • Take a short course of ARV treatment for the baby.

  • Perform a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

Through breast milk?

• Performing a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

• Following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection.

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• Through pregnancy

• Continuing ARV treatment if the mother is at the point of needing the treatment, or, following a short course of ARV treatment to protect the fetus from HIV infection.

• During birth

• If continuing ARV treatment, the mother will either:

  • Take a short course of ARV treatment for the baby.

  • Perform a caesarean section, if medically and economically possible.

Testing for HIV

The only sure way to know your HIV status is by getting an HIV test. When HIV enters a person’s body, the body begins to produce antibodies. These proteins are called antibodies. The HIV test is a simple blood test that will look for the presence of antibodies in your system.

The time between exposure to HIV and the detection of antibodies in the blood is called the “window period.” This window period can be anywhere from 3 to 6 months. Therefore, if you test negative for HIV, it is important to be tested again after these 3 months, and during those 3 months to make sure that you are not exposed to any risk to the virus.

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