

What are HIV and AIDS? A Brief Introduction

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What are HIV and AIDS?

HIV

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. Once HIV enters the body, it begins to weaken the immune system, the system that usually protects the body against disease. Without proper HIV treatment, a person's immune system becomes weaker and they can become sick from various infections, sometimes called "opportunistic infections".¹

AIDS

AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. Without treatment, a person with HIV can eventually become sick with a life-threatening infection, leading to an AIDS diagnosis. In other words, an AIDS diagnosis requires two things:

- 1 the presence of HIV in the body; and
- 2 a life threatening opportunistic infection.


There are other factors that are important to consider here, including the viral load* of someone who is HIV positive. Note that not all opportunistic infections are life threatening or lead to AIDS.¹ For more information, please see the websites listed on the side of this page.

IS THERE A CURE?

The science and treatment of HIV have come a long way. Today, while there is no cure for HIV, there are effective treatments that mean HIV can be managed like other chronic illnesses. With treatment, people living with HIV can live long, healthy lives.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about HIV and AIDS, check out:

-  catie.ca
-  whai.ca
-  hivresourcesontario.ca
-  ohtn.on.ca
-  hivevidence.org

You can also contact the AIDS and Sexual Health Information Line at



1 (800) 668-2437



***Note:** Viral load refers to the amount of HIV in bodily fluid usually measured in blood.²

HIV transmission

If someone living with HIV has a high viral load* in their blood, then they may also have a high viral load in other bodily fluids and can transmit HIV on to someone not living with HIV more easily. HIV can be transmitted, for example, during condom-less sex or through drug use (by sharing needles) with someone who is HIV positive. HIV can be transmitted through five bodily fluids:



Blood



Anal Fluid



Vaginal Fluid



Semen
(including pre-cum)

*Did you know
that HIV is not
found in sperm,
only in semen?*



Breast/Chest
Milk

HIV TRANSMISSION & PREGNANCY:

With HIV treatment that is available today, people who are living with HIV can get pregnant and have healthy babies. Without treatment, people living with HIV can transmit HIV to the fetus during pregnancy or childbirth; however, in Canada, this is currently rare. Research shows that transmission rates in Canada are less than 2% with effective treatment and strong, supportive health care.³ HIV can also be transmitted to a baby through breast/chest feeding. Health Canada currently recommends parents avoid breast/chest feeding to reduce risk.³ This can be a difficult decision due to social and cultural expectations and norms, and since recommendations differ in different parts of the world. It is important to have support to help navigate information, local best practices and social expectations.^{1, 3, 4} Beginning HIV treatment before or very early in pregnancy and maintaining an undetectable viral load throughout pregnancy will prevent transmission of HIV to newborn babies.⁵ There is a lot of helpful information about pregnancy, breast/chest feeding and HIV available online. Please see the side bar for more information.

MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about HIV and pregnancy, check out:

Having a Baby: What people living with HIV should know about pregnancy and infant feeding

Supporting mothers in ways that work: A resource toolkit for service providers working with mothers living with HIV

➤ whai.ca/resources

Pregnancy and Infant Feeding

What you should know if you are living with HIV and you want to get pregnant

Preparing for Pregnancy

➤ catie.ca/prevention/pregnancy-and-infant-feeding

Why should you care about women's HIV experiences?

“But HIV isn’t an issue in our region.”

Because of the highly stigmatized nature of HIV, people are often very private about their HIV status. People living with HIV often guard this information, resulting in the impression that people living with HIV do not access programming at many organizations; however, HIV exists throughout communities. Women living with HIV are thriving members of communities throughout Ontario: urban, suburban, and rural. Having quality support and care is key to ensuring the experiences of women living with HIV are validated.

“I have lived in this community for 20 years and I haven’t told anybody. Even my closest friends don’t know.”

Historically, many people have viewed HIV as a virus impacting gay men. Women’s experiences of living with HIV, their symptoms, and access to treatment was limited and silenced creating isolation. This has had an impact on women’s health and well-being. It is important for us to recognize women’s experiences, ensure health care is accessible, and support women to not live in silence.

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