

# HIV And AIDS: Who Is At Risk?



## What Is HIV?

**HIV**—the human immunodeficiency virus—is a virus that attacks cells that help the body fight infection, making a person more vulnerable to other infections and diseases. HIV can be passed from person to person if someone with HIV has unprotected sex or shares injection drug equipment (e.g., needles, syringes, rinse water) with another person.

If left untreated, HIV can lead to the disease AIDS.

The human body can't get rid of HIV and no effective HIV cure exists. However, by taking HIV medicine (called antiretroviral therapy or ART), people with HIV can live long and healthy lives and prevent transmitting HIV to their sexual partners. In addition, there are effective methods to prevent getting HIV through sex or drug use, including pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) and post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP).

## What Is AIDS?

**AIDS**—the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome—is the late stage of HIV infection that occurs when the body's immune system is badly damaged because of the virus.

In the U.S., most people with HIV do not develop AIDS because taking HIV medicine every day as prescribed stops the progression of the disease.

## How Can A Person Get HIV?

A person can only get HIV by coming into direct contact with certain body fluids from a person with HIV who has a detectable viral load (e.g. a detectable amount of HIV in the blood). These fluids are:

- Blood
- Semen and pre-seminal fluid
- Rectal fluids
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk

For the virus to spread, the HIV in these fluids must get into the bloodstream of an HIV-negative person through a mucous membrane (found in the rectum, vagina, mouth, or tip of the penis); open cuts or sores; or by direct injection.

People with HIV who take HIV medicine daily as prescribed and get and keep an undetectable viral load have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting HIV to their HIV-negative partners.

- HIV is a virus that attacks cells that help the body fight infection, making a person more vulnerable to other infections and diseases.
- AIDS is the late stage of HIV infection that occurs when the body's immune system is badly damaged because of the virus.
- Having unprotected sex—sex without a condom—and sharing injection drug equipment are the most common ways HIV is spread in the United States.
- The only way to know for sure if a person has HIV is to get tested.

## How Is HIV Spread From Person To Person?

HIV can only be spread through specific activities. In the United States, the most common ways are:

- Having sex with someone who has HIV without using a condom or taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV
- Sharing injection drug equipment (“works”), such as needles, syringes, and rinse water with someone who has HIV

Less common ways include:

- From mother to child during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding. However, the use of HIV medicines and other strategies have helped lower the risk of mother-to-child transmission of HIV to 1% or less in the United States.
- Getting stuck with an HIV-contaminated needle or other sharp object. This is a risk mainly for health care workers. The risk is very low.



Wheeler

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## Ways HIV Cannot Be Spread

HIV is not spread by:

- Air or water
- Mosquitoes, ticks or other insects
- Saliva, tears, or sweat that is not mixed with the blood of a person with HIV
- Shaking hands; hugging; sharing toilets; sharing dishes, silverware, or drinking glasses; or engaging in closed-mouth or “social” kissing with a person with HIV
- Drinking fountains
- Other sexual activities that don’t involve the exchange of body fluids (for example, touching)

HIV can’t be passed through healthy, unbroken skin.

## Who Is At Risk For Getting HIV?

Some groups of people in the United States are more likely to get HIV than others because of many factors, including the status of their sex partners, their risk behaviors, and where they live.

When a person lives in a community where many people have HIV infection, the chances of having sex or sharing needles or other injection equipment with someone who has HIV are higher. People can use CDC’s HIV, STD, hepatitis, and tuberculosis Atlas Plus (<https://www.cdc.gov/NCHHSTP/Atlas>) to see the percentage of people with HIV (“prevalence”) in different US communities. Within any community, the prevalence of HIV can vary among different populations.

Gay and bisexual men have the largest number of new diagnoses in the United States. Blacks/African Americans and Hispanics/Latinos are disproportionately affected by HIV compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Also, transgender women who have sex with men are among the groups at highest risk for HIV infection, and injection drug users remain at significant risk for getting HIV.

Risky behaviors, like having sex without using a condom or taking medicines to prevent or treat HIV, and sharing needles or syringes play a big role in HIV transmission.

## How Does A Person Know If They Have HIV?

**The only way for a person to know for sure if they have HIV is to get tested.** People can’t rely on symptoms to tell whether they have HIV.

A person who knows their HIV status has powerful information and can take steps to keep themselves and their partner(s) healthy:

- **A person who tests positive** can take medicine to treat HIV. People with HIV who take HIV medicine daily as prescribed can live a long and healthy life and prevent transmission to others. Without HIV medicine (called antiretroviral therapy or ART), the virus replicates in the body and damages the immune system. This is why people need to start treatment as soon as possible after testing positive.
- **A person who tests negative** can take several steps to prevent getting HIV.
- **A person who is pregnant** should be tested for HIV so that they can begin treatment if they are HIV-positive. If an HIV-positive woman is treated for HIV early in her pregnancy, the risk of transmitting HIV to her baby can be very low.

## Where Can A Person Get Tested?

A person can ask their health care provider for an HIV test. Many medical clinics, substance abuse programs, community health centers, and hospitals offer them too. People can also find a testing site near them by visiting [gettested.cdc.gov](http://gettested.cdc.gov) or calling 1-800-CDC-INFO (232-4636).

People can also buy a self-test kit at a pharmacy or online or check to see if the health department or another organization near them is providing a self-test for a reduced cost or for free.

## Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental  
Health and Addiction Services  
<https://portal.ct.gov/DMHAS>

CT Department of Public  
Health

<https://portal.ct.gov/DPH>

ACT

[www.aids-ct.org](http://www.aids-ct.org)

## National Resources

Centers for Disease Control  
and Prevention

[www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/basics)

1.800.CDC.INFO (232-4636)

HIV.gov

[www.hiv.gov](http://www.hiv.gov)

