What is HIV?

- HIV is a virus that attacks the immune system and makes it hard for the body to fight diseases and infections.
- There is no cure for HIV. However, with early diagnosis and treatment people can live long, healthy lives.
- HIV can lead to a condition called AIDS. This happens when the immune system gets too weak to fight infections and the person gets HIV-related diseases.

How do I get HIV?

HIV is spread through infected body fluids (e.g., blood, semen, vaginal secretions, rectal fluid, breastmilk) that get into someone’s blood. This can happen when people:

- have unprotected sex (vaginal, oral, anal sex)
- share needles or other drug use equipment
- share sex toys, razors, or toothbrushes
- have HIV and are pregnant, give birth, or breastfeed
- use dirty equipment for tattoos, piercings, or acupuncture
- have contact with an infected object (e.g., needle) by accident

The risk of getting HIV from a blood transfusion is very low. All blood products in Canada have been screened for HIV since 1985.

The chance of getting HIV is higher if you have other sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

HIV is not spread by:

- casual contact with someone who has HIV (e.g., touching, kissing, hugging, sneezing)
- objects (e.g., toilet seats, water fountains, towels, door handles)
- insects and animals

How do I know if I have HIV?

- You can have HIV and not know it. A blood test is the only way to know if you have HIV.
- When some people are first infected with HIV (about 2 to 6 weeks after being exposed), they might have flu-like symptoms (e.g. fever, sore throat, swollen glands) or a rash. Other people don’t have any symptoms.
- HIV is a reportable disease in Alberta. When a person has a positive test, all sex and needle-sharing partners must be screened for the virus. This process is confidential.
How do I get a HIV test?

- Ask your healthcare provider for a blood test for HIV. It’s free and confidential.
- If you have HIV, your body will make antibodies to fight it. The blood test checks for these antibodies.
- Most people with HIV test positive within 30 days of being exposed. However, it can take up to 3 months. You may need your blood test repeated.
- Get tested at least one time a year or more often if you’re high risk (e.g., unprotected sex with multiple partners, sexual assault, share drug equipment, or are a man who has sex with men).

How can I prevent HIV?

- Choose safe sex practices with little or no risk (e.g., masturbation, massage).
- Practice safer sex. Always use condoms for vaginal and anal sex. Use a condom or dental dam for oral sex.
- Contraceptive products with the spermicide nonoxynol-9 (e.g., condoms, foam) might irritate the skin, which can make it easier to get HIV.
- Limit how many sex partners you have. Know your partners and their sexual history (including when their last HIV test was).
- Don’t share sex toys.
- Don’t share needles or drug equipment. If you inject drugs, find out about needle exchange by calling Health Link at 8-1-1.
- If you’re getting a tattoo or piercing, ask if the tools and equipment have been sterilized.

Sexual Decision Making

- You have the right to choose whether or not to have sex
- If you choose to have sex, protect yourself against pregnancy and STIs.
- Before you have sex, talk to your partner about your choices.

For More Information

- www.myhealth.alberta.ca
- www.catie.ca
- www.sexgerms.ca

This material is for information purposes only. It should not be used in place of medical advice, instruction, and/or treatment. If you have questions, speak with your doctor or appropriate healthcare provider.