

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)
- have HIV and are pregnant, give birth, or breastfeed
- share needles or other drug use equipment
- use dirty equipment for tattoos, piercings, or acupuncture
- share sex toys, razors, or toothbrushes
- 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.