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Patient information: HIV/AIDS (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

What is HIV? — HIV is the name of a virus that can affect the body's "immune system," which is responsible for fighting infections. When people have an untreated HIV infection, they can become sick easily. That's because their immune system cannot work as well to fight off infections or cancer. Even so, people with HIV can take medicines to control the virus, keep their immune system strong, and stay healthy for many years.

People can become infected with HIV if blood or body fluid (such as semen) from a person with HIV enters their body. For example, a person can get HIV if he or she:

- Has sex without using a condom with someone who has HIV
- Shares needles or syringes with someone who has HIV

What is AIDS? — AIDS is the term doctors use to describe the last stage of HIV infection when the immune system is very weak.

What are the symptoms of HIV? — Early symptoms of HIV infection can occur within weeks or months of being infected with the virus. These can include:

- Fever, sore throat, headache, muscle pain, and joint pain (these symptoms usually last about 2 weeks)
- Swelling of bean-shaped organs under the skin called lymph nodes, usually in the neck or armpit (this symptom can also happen in people who have HIV for a long time)
- A rash that is usually on the face, neck and upper chest

People who have had HIV for many years might have other problems, such as:

- Fever, stomach pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and weight loss
- Other infections, including:
 - Lung infections
 - Brain infections
 - Eye infections that cause trouble seeing
 - Yeast infections in the mouth that can cause soreness and raised, white patches

Is there a test for HIV? — Yes. You can have HIV testing done in your doctor's office or clinic using a sample of blood or sometimes saliva (spit). Results from some tests take a few days to come back. But results from rapid HIV tests can be ready within minutes.

Most pharmacies also sell test kits that you can use at home. For 1 type of home test, you prick your finger, blot the blood on a test strip, and mail the strip to a lab. Then the lab calls you with the results. The test is totally private, and the results are not reported to anyone but you. A different type of home test,

called OraQuick, works a lot like a home pregnancy test. It comes with a special test strip that you wipe along your gums. After 20 to 40 minutes the test strip can tell you if you might have HIV. If you take a home test that says you are HIV positive, see your doctor and ask for a follow-up test to make sure.

Sometimes, it can take up to 6 months after being infected for the HIV virus to show up in your body. If your test does not show that you have HIV now, you might need to repeat the test in a few months to make sure you are not infected.

How is HIV treated? — Doctors can prescribe different combinations of medicines to treat HIV. These medicines are called “antiretroviral medicines.” You and your doctor should work together to decide when you should start treatment and which medicines are right for you.

Your treatment will depend a lot on:

- How your immune system is working – Doctors use a blood test called a T-cell count to see how HIV is affecting your immune system. If your T-cell count is low, it is especially important to start treatment. Even if your T-cell count is high, your doctor might suggest treatment.
- Your age
- Any other medical problems you might have

Most people with HIV need to take pills at set times each day. It is important to follow all of your doctor’s instructions about treatment. This is because your HIV can get worse if you skip or stop taking your medicines. Let your doctor know if you have any side effects or problems with your medicines.

Some people with HIV also take other types of medicines every day to prevent HIV-related infections. For example, most doctors recommend that people with a low T-cell count take an antibiotic every day to keep from getting a lung infection called PCP.

What if I am pregnant or want to get pregnant? — If you have HIV, your baby can become infected with HIV during pregnancy, birth, or through breastfeeding. If you are pregnant or want to get pregnant, talk with your doctor about ways to reduce the chance of passing HIV to your baby.

What can I do to prevent spreading HIV to other people? — To reduce the chance of spreading HIV to other people:

- Get tested for HIV and start treatment as early as possible
- Tell anyone you have sex with that you have HIV
- Use a condom every time you have vaginal, anal, or oral sex
- Do not share razors or toothbrushes
- Do not share drug needles or syringes

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