

WHAT IS HIV?

A publication by the US Department of Health and Human Services.

“HIV” stands for **Human Immunodeficiency Virus**. To understand what that means, let’s break it down:

- **H** – Human – This particular *virus* can only infect human beings.
- **I** – Immunodeficiency – HIV weakens your *immune system* by destroying important cells that fight disease and infection. A "deficient" immune system can't protect you.
- **V** – Virus – A virus can only reproduce itself by taking over a cell in the body of its host.

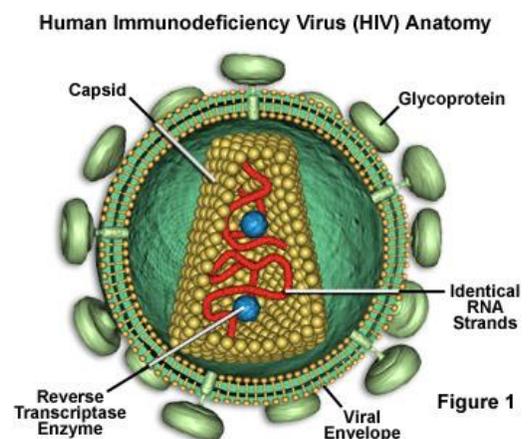
HIV is a lot like other viruses, including those that cause the "flu" or the common cold. But there is an important difference – over time, your immune system can clear most viruses out of your body. That isn't the case with HIV – the human immune system can't seem to get rid of it. That means that once you have HIV, you have it for life.

We know that HIV can hide for long periods of time in the cells of your body and that it attacks a key part of your immune system – your T-cells or CD4 cells. Your body has to have these cells to fight infections and disease, but HIV invades them, uses them to make more copies of itself, and then destroys them.

Over time, HIV can destroy so many of your CD4 cells that your body can't fight infections and diseases anymore. When that happens, HIV infection can lead to AIDS, the final stage of HIV infection.

However, not everyone who has HIV progresses to AIDS. With proper treatment, called “antiretroviral therapy” (ART), you can keep the level of HIV virus in your body low. ART is the use of HIV medicines to fight HIV infection. It involves taking a combination of HIV medicines every day. These HIV medicines can control the virus so that you can live a longer, healthier life and reduce the risk of transmitting HIV to others. Before the introduction of ART in the mid-1990s, people with HIV could progress to AIDS in just a few years. Today, a person who is diagnosed with HIV and treated before the disease is far advanced can have a nearly normal life expectancy.

No safe and effective cure for HIV currently exists, but scientists are working hard to find one, and remain hopeful.



WHAT IS AIDS?

“AIDS” stands for **Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome**. To understand what that means, let’s break it down:

- **A** – Acquired – AIDS is not something you inherit from your parents. You **acquire** AIDS after birth.
- **I** – Immuno – Your body's immune system includes all the organs and cells that work to fight off infection or disease.
- **D** – Deficiency – You get AIDS when your immune system is "deficient," or isn't working the way it should.
- **S** – Syndrome – A syndrome is a collection of symptoms and signs of disease. AIDS is a syndrome, rather than a single disease, because it is a complex illness with a wide range of complications and symptoms.



As noted, AIDS is the final stage of HIV infection, and not everyone who has HIV advances to this stage. People at this stage of HIV disease have badly damaged immune systems, which put them at risk for *opportunistic infections (OIs)*.

You are considered to have progressed to AIDS if you have one or more specific OIs, certain cancers, or a very low number of CD4 cells. If you have AIDS, you will need medical intervention and treatment to prevent death.

For more information, see CDC’s [HIV/AIDS Basics](#).

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Do all people with HIV get AIDS?

No. Being diagnosed with HIV does NOT mean a person will also be diagnosed with AIDS. Healthcare professionals diagnose AIDS only when people with HIV disease begin to get severe opportunistic infections or their CD4 counts fall below a certain level. With proper treatment, you can keep the level of HIV virus in your body low. This will prevent HIV from advancing to AIDS and reduce the chances that you will transmit the virus to your sexual partners.

Is there a cure for HIV?

For most people, the answer is no. Most reports of a cure involve HIV-infected people who needed treatment for a cancer that would have killed them otherwise. But these treatments are very risky, even life-threatening, and are used only when the HIV-infected people would have died without them. Antiretroviral therapy (ART), however, can dramatically prolong the lives of many people infected with HIV and lower their chance of infecting others. It is important that people get tested for HIV and know that they are infected early so that medical care and treatment have the greatest effect.

Can I get HIV from being spit on or scratched by an HIV-infected person?

No. HIV cannot be spread through saliva, and there is no documented case of transmission from an HIV-infected person spitting on another person. There is no risk of transmission from scratching because there is no transfer of body fluids between people.

Can I get HIV from mosquitos?

No. There is no evidence of HIV transmission from mosquitoes or any other insects—even in areas where there are many cases of HIV and large populations of mosquitoes. Unlike organisms that are transmitted by insect bites, HIV does not reproduce (and does not survive) in insects.

Can I get HIV from tattoos or body piercings?

Tattooing or body piercing present a potential risk of HIV transmission, but no cases of HIV transmission from these activities have been documented. Be sure that only new needles, ink, and other supplies are used and that the person doing the procedure is properly licensed.

For more information about the difference between HIV and AIDS, see [What Is HIV/AIDS?](#)

HIV Can Be Transmitted Through...



Sexual Contact



Injection Drug Use



Pregnancy, Childbirth & Breast Feeding



Occupational Exposure

HOW DO YOU GET HIV?

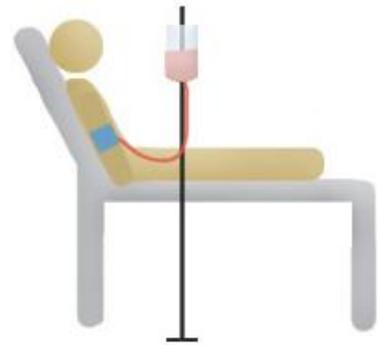
Certain body fluids from an HIV-infected person can transmit HIV.

These body fluids are:

- Blood
- Semen (cum)
- Pre-seminal fluid (pre-cum)
- Rectal fluids
- Vaginal fluids
- Breast milk

These body fluids must come into contact with a mucous membrane or damaged tissue or be directly injected into your bloodstream (by a needle or syringe) for transmission to possibly occur. Mucous membranes are the soft, moist areas just inside the openings to your body. They can be found inside the rectum, the vagina or the opening of the penis, and the mouth.

For more information, see CDC's [HIV Basics: HIV Transmission](#).



and rarely,
Blood Transfusion/Organ Transplant

THIS PARTICULAR
VIRUS CAN ONLY

INFECT
HUMANBEINGS



Basic Facts about HIV/AIDS

Modes of HIV/AIDS transmission:



Sexual intercourse



Blood and blood products



Sharing of needles/syringes



From infected mother to her child

Ways to prevent getting infected with HIV/AIDS:



Abstinence



Be faithful



Condoms



Don't share needles

HIV/AIDS cannot be transmitted through:



Toilet



Sharing utensils



Mosquito

How Is HIV Spread?

Approximately 50,000 new HIV infections occur in the United States each year. In the U.S., HIV is spread mainly by:

- Having sex with someone who has HIV. In general:
- Having multiple sex partners or having sexually transmitted infections can increase the risk of HIV infection through sex.
- Sharing needles, syringes, rinse water, or other equipment (“works”) used to prepare injection drugs with someone who has HIV.

Less commonly, HIV may be spread by:

- Being born to an infected mother. HIV can be passed from mother to child during pregnancy, birth, or breastfeeding.
- Being stuck with an HIV-contaminated needle or other sharp object. This is a risk mainly for health care workers.
- Receiving blood transfusions, blood products, or organ/tissue transplants that are contaminated with HIV. This risk is extremely small because of rigorous testing of the US blood supply and donated organs and tissues.

HIV is NOT spread by:

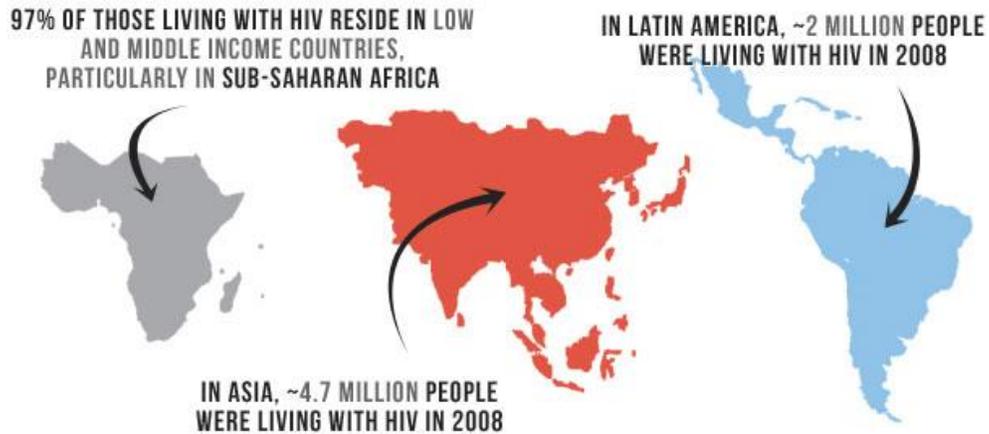
- Air or water
- Insects, including mosquitoes or ticks
- Saliva, tears, or sweat
- Casual contact, like shaking hands, hugging or sharing dishes/drinking glasses
- Drinking fountains
- Toilet seats

HIV is not spread through the air and it does not live long outside the human body. Having an undetectable viral load greatly lowers the chance that a person living with HIV can transmit the virus to a partner, but there is still some risk.

How Do You Get AIDS?

The terms “HIV” and “AIDS” can be confusing because both terms refer to the same disease. However, “HIV” refers to the virus itself, and “AIDS” refers to the late stage of HIV infection, when an HIV-infected person’s immune system is severely damaged and has difficulty fighting diseases and certain cancers. Before the development of certain medications, people with HIV could progress to AIDS in just a few years. But today, most people who are HIV-positive do not progress to AIDS. That’s because if you have HIV and you take *antiretroviral therapy* (ART) consistently, you can keep the level of HIV in your body low. This will help keep your body strong and healthy and reduce the likelihood that you will ever progress to AIDS. It will also help lower your risk of transmitting HIV to others.

The Global HIV/AIDS Crisis Today



HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, has become one of the world's most serious health and development challenges:

- 33.4 million are currently living with HIV/AIDS.
- More than 25 million people have died of AIDS worldwide since the first cases were reported in 1981.
- In 2008, 2 million people died due to HIV/AIDS, and another 2.7 million were newly infected.
- While cases have been reported in all regions of the world, almost all those living with HIV (97%) reside in low- and middle-income countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), most people living with HIV or at risk for HIV do not have access to prevention, care, and treatment, and there is still no cure.

The HIV epidemic not only affects the health of individuals, it impacts households, communities, and the development and economic growth of nations. Many of the countries hardest hit by HIV also suffer from other infectious diseases, food insecurity, and other serious problems.

Despite these challenges, there have been successes and promising signs. New global efforts have been mounted to address the epidemic, particularly in the last decade. Prevention has helped to reduce HIV prevalence rates in a small but growing number of countries and new HIV infections are believed to be on the decline. In addition, the number of people with HIV receiving treatment in resource poor countries has increased 10-fold since 2002, reaching an estimated 4 million by 2008.

Overview compiled with information from [WHO](#), [USAID](#) and [Kaiser Family Foundation](#).

The United States supports a wide range of activities—from research and development to technical assistance and financial support to other nations—to combat the global HIV/AIDS pandemic. Read about [PEPFAR](#) and [U.S. government global HIV/AIDS activities](#).

This document has been extracted from the US Government website: <http://www.aids.gov>, which is maintained by the US Department of Health and Human Services. November 2014. <http://www.aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/how-you-get-hiv-aids/index.html>