

HIV and HIV tests

What are HIV and AIDS?

The human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks the immune system. The immune system is the part of the body that fights infection and disease. There is no cure for HIV, but lifelong treatment with medications called highly active antiretroviral therapy (HAART) means that you can live a long life with HIV.

Without treatment, HIV infection may become a serious disease called Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). AIDS occurs when a person's immune system has been severely weakened by HIV. Having HIV does not mean that you have AIDS.

How can I get HIV?

HIV is found in body fluids, such as blood, semen, breast milk, and fluids from the vagina and anus. HIV can be passed on by:

- Having vaginal or anal sex without using a condom (the risk increases if either person has another sexually transmitted infection like syphilis, herpes, chlamydia or gonorrhea)
- Having oral sex (although the risk of HIV transmission is lower)
- A mother with HIV can pass it to her baby during pregnancy, childbirth, or while breastfeeding (breastfeeding is not recommended for mothers living with HIV)
- Exposure in the work environment (e.g., health care providers or emergency responders);
- Sharing needles, syringes or other injecting equipment;
- Receiving a blood transfusion (this can happen in countries where the blood supply is not tested for HIV)
- Unsterilized body art equipment like tattoo or piercing equipment

A person has significant amounts of the virus in their body when they first contract HIV, which increases the possibility of transmitting it to others. You can greatly reduce your risk of transmitting HIV to others by taking antiretroviral medications. These medications decrease the amount of HIV in the body, which reduces the chance of passing it on.

You cannot get HIV through casual contact, such as sharing food or drinks, insect bites, hugging or kissing.

What are the symptoms of HIV?

Symptoms of HIV vary depending on the stage of infection. In the first few weeks after infection, some people have flu-like symptoms. This may include fever, headache, muscle or joint soreness, swollen glands, sore throat or rash.

The only way to know if you have HIV is to have your blood tested.

What is an HIV test?

If you have been exposed to HIV, one kind of HIV test can detect proteins made in your body called antibodies, but this will not detect a very recent infection. Another test can detect genetic material from the HIV virus (p24 antigen) before these antibodies develop, which indicates an "acute" infection. When either of these are detected, the HIV test result is "reactive" or positive, indicating the presence of the HIV virus.

Ninety nine percent of people who have been exposed to HIV will develop detectable levels of antibodies within 6 weeks. In very rare circumstances, it can take up to 3 months to develop antibodies to HIV following infection.

What are the types of HIV tests?

Currently there are two ways to test for HIV. One of these is a standard laboratory test done using a

blood sample taken from your arm. The result is available in 1 to 2 weeks.

The second type of HIV test is called a point-of-care (POC) test using a drop of blood taken from your finger. The result is available at the time of testing. When a point-of-care test indicates that HIV antibodies may be present, a standard laboratory test is required to confirm HIV infection.

Why test for HIV?

Having an HIV test and knowing your test result will help you to make decisions about your health. If HIV is diagnosed early, antiretroviral therapy can slow or stop the damage to the immune system.

HIV testing guidelines in B.C. recommend that everyone aged 18 to 70 years has an HIV test every 5 years. They recommend more frequent testing for people who:

- Belong to populations that have a greater chance of acquiring HIV
- Are pregnant
- Experience a change in their health that suggests HIV
- Request a test

It is your choice to have an HIV test. Talk to your health care provider if you have any concerns or questions about the HIV test or your HIV test result.

How can I get an HIV test?

You can get a referral for an HIV test through your primary care provider, at a walk-in clinic, or by visiting one of the clinics listed in the SmartSexResource clinic finder:
<https://smartsexresource.com/clinics-testing>.

You can also access HIV testing directly at certain lab location in B.C. For more information, visit GetCheckedOnline:
<https://getcheckedonline.com/Pages/default.aspx>.

What if my HIV test is negative?

If your standard laboratory or point-of-care HIV blood test is negative and it has been more than 3

months since you may have been exposed to HIV, then it means that you likely do not have HIV. If it has been less than 3 months since you may have been exposed, you may still have HIV, but it is too early for the test to detect the antibodies. You will need to have a second test after the 3 months have passed to be sure.

What if my HIV test is positive?

Although HIV is a life-long infection, you can still live a healthy and productive life. However, getting early and ongoing treatment and health care is important. Talk to your health care provider about supports, your health care, and about antiretroviral medications.

Who has access to HIV test results?

In B.C., positive HIV test results are shared with public health, in a confidential manner, to ensure that you and your partner(s) are offered support and follow-up. In the event of a positive result, if you do not wish your full name to be reported to public health, you may request that your first name, initials and birth date be used as your identifying information when your results are reported.

Some clinics allow you to test using a numbered code and give no contact information. This is called anonymous testing, and is currently being offered at a limited number of sites in B.C.

Laboratory test results are kept in the provincial laboratory database. Your HIV test results may also be stored in your electronic health record within your health authority. Health care providers who are providing you with care will be able to see portions of your health care record. How much a health care provider can see of your record depends on their role. Health care providers who are not providing you with care will not be able to access your record. You can place disclosure directives on your electronic health records that enable you to choose who will have access to them. For more information, visit <https://fipa.bc.ca/get-help/your-health-information>.

Should my partner(s) be tested for HIV?

If you have an HIV infection and are sexually active or you use injection drugs, it is important to tell your sexual partner(s) and anyone who might have shared your drug-using equipment. This will enable them to make decisions about their health and getting tested.

How can I prevent HIV infection?

You can prevent HIV and other sexually transmitted infections by doing the following:

- Always use condoms for any vaginal, anal, and oral sex
- Talk with your sex partner(s) about getting tested for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections
- Use new needles and other drug-injecting equipment every time you inject

- Use only properly sterilized equipment for tattooing or other body art
- If you are sharing sex toys, use a new condom on the sex toy for each person

To reduce your risk of HIV infection, you can take antiretroviral drugs (known as oral pre-exposure prophylaxis, or PrEP) if you don't have HIV but are at risk of HIV infection.

If you believe that you have been exposed to HIV within the past 72 hours, you should go to your local emergency room for advice about whether to take medications to prevent developing HIV infection.

For more information

For more information on how you can reduce your chance of getting an STI, see [HealthLinkBC File #080 Preventing sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#).

