



# **HIV** BASIC FACTS



Canada's source for  
HIV and hepatitis C  
information

**There is no vaccine to prevent HIV.  
There is no cure for HIV but there is treatment.  
Anyone can be infected with HIV.**

# What is HIV?

## HIV is a virus that can make you sick.

- HIV weakens your immune system, your body's built-in defence against disease and illness.
- You can have HIV without knowing it. You may not look or feel sick for years, but you can still pass the virus on to other people.
- Without HIV treatment, your immune system can become too weak to fight off serious illnesses. HIV can also damage other parts of your body. Without treatment, you can eventually become sick with life-threatening infections. This is the most serious stage of HIV infection, called AIDS.
- There is no vaccine to prevent HIV but there are things you can do to avoid passing or getting HIV. Read on to learn more!

**HIV stands for  
human immunodeficiency virus.**

**AIDS stands for acquired  
immunodeficiency syndrome.**

**There is no cure for HIV...  
but there is treatment.**

- There is no cure for HIV, but with proper treatment and care, most people with HIV can avoid getting AIDS, stay healthy and live a long life.
- HIV drugs have to be taken every day. They cannot get rid of HIV but they can keep it under control. They can also dramatically lower your risk of passing HIV to the people you have sex with.

## Who can get HIV?

Anyone can get HIV, no matter...

- your age
- your sex
- your race or ethnic origin
- who you have sex with

## How does HIV get passed from one person to another?

- Only five body fluids can contain enough HIV to infect someone: blood, semen (including pre-cum), rectal fluid, vaginal fluid and breast milk.
- HIV can only get passed when one of these fluids from a person with HIV gets into the bloodstream of another person—through broken skin, the opening of the penis or the wet linings of the body, such as the vagina, rectum or foreskin.
- HIV cannot pass through healthy, unbroken skin.

The two main ways that HIV can get passed between you and someone else are:

- through **sex**
- by **sharing needles** or other equipment to inject drugs (including steroids or hormones)

HIV **can** also be passed:

- by sharing needles or ink to get a tattoo
- by sharing needles or jewelry to get a body piercing
- by sharing acupuncture needles
- to a fetus or baby during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding

HIV **cannot** be passed by:

- talking, shaking hands, working or eating with someone who has HIV
- hugs or kisses
- coughs or sneezes
- swimming pools
- toilet seats or water fountains
- bed sheets or towels
- forks, spoons, cups or food
- insects or animals

# HIV & Sex

**HIV can be passed during sex (this includes vaginal, anal and oral sex and sharing sex toys).**

But there are things you can do to practise safer sex. You can protect yourself and your partner(s) from HIV by doing the following:

- **Use a latex, polyurethane or nitrile condom** correctly every time you have vaginal or anal sex. You can use an external condom (also called a male condom) or an internal condom (female condom). Throw out the condom after each sex act and do not use a condom with more than one partner. This will protect you from HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), such as gonorrhoea and syphilis.
- **Use only water-based or silicone-based lubricants** with latex condoms. Oil-based lubricants can make them break.
- **If you are HIV-positive and not already on HIV treatment, talk to your doctor about starting treatment.** HIV drugs can not only protect your health but also greatly reduce the risk of HIV transmission.
- **If you are HIV-negative and at higher risk for HIV, you might be a candidate for PrEP,** or pre-exposure prophylaxis. PrEP involves taking certain HIV drugs every day to reduce the risk of getting HIV. Talk to your doctor to find out if PrEP might be right for you.
- **Get tested for STIs regularly.** Having an STI increases your risk of getting and passing HIV and other STIs.
- **Avoid sharing sex toys** (and if you do, cover each one with a new condom before each use). It is also important to clean your toys between vaginal and anal use.
- **Use a condom or dental dam every time you have oral sex.** Oral sex is much less risky than vaginal or anal sex, but it's not completely safe.
- **Choose forms of sexual stimulation that pose little or no chance of HIV,** like masturbation or sensual massage.

People can have HIV or other STIs without knowing it because these infections often do not cause symptoms. Don't assume that your partner knows if they have HIV or any other STI. The only way to know for sure is to **get tested**.



## HIV & Pregnancy

**Without proper treatment and care, HIV can pass from a woman to her baby:**

- during pregnancy
- at birth
- through breastfeeding

**Protect your baby.**

If you are HIV-positive and pregnant, you can reduce the chances of your child being HIV-positive to **less than 1 percent** by getting proper HIV treatment and care and not breastfeeding after birth.

Talk to your healthcare provider to find out more.

**If you are pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant, get tested for HIV.**

**If you are HIV-positive, with proper treatment you can have a healthy pregnancy and a healthy baby.**

# HIV & Drug Use

## HIV can be passed by sharing needles and other drug equipment.

Sharing needles and other drug equipment is very risky. It can also spread hepatitis C, a virus that damages the liver. Hepatitis C is passed when the blood of someone who has hepatitis C gets into the bloodstream of another person.

## Protect yourself and the people you do drugs with.

If you use drugs, there are things you can do to protect yourself and use drugs in a safer way. This is called **harm reduction**.

## To practise safer drug use...

- Use a clean new needle and syringe every time you use.
- Use your own drug equipment (such as pipes, bills, straws, cookers, water, alcohol swabs) every time. Never share equipment, not even with your sex partner.
- Get new needles and supplies from your local harm reduction program, needle/syringe program or community health centre.
- Get tested for HIV and hepatitis C. If you know that you have HIV or hepatitis C, you can take steps to protect yourself and others. If you test positive for HIV or hepatitis C, talk to your doctor or nurse about getting treatment.

## HIV & Blood Products

Since November 1985, all blood products in Canada are checked for HIV. A person's risk of getting infected from a blood transfusion in Canada is **very, very low**.

There is no chance of getting HIV from donating blood.

## HIV & the Law

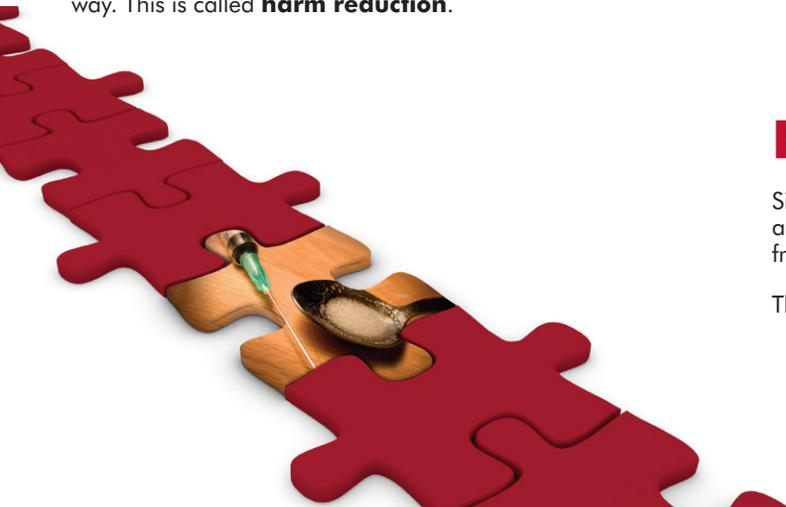
In Canada if you have HIV, you have a legal duty to tell your sex partner(s) before having any kind of sex that poses a "realistic possibility of transmitting HIV." People with HIV have been convicted of serious crimes for not telling their sex partners they have HIV.

- You **do** have a legal duty to disclose your HIV status before having:
  - vaginal or anal sex without a condom (regardless of your viral load); or
  - vaginal or anal sex when your viral load is not undetectable (or not low), even if you use a condom.

- You **do not** have a duty to disclose before having *vaginal* sex if your viral load is low (or undetectable) and you use a condom. It is not clear whether this also applies to *anal* sex.
- It is not clear how the law applies to oral sex (with or without a condom).

For more information on HIV and the law, contact the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. People there may be able to refer you to a lawyer but cannot provide you with legal advice.

[www.aidslaw.ca](http://www.aidslaw.ca) • [info@aidslaw.ca](mailto:info@aidslaw.ca)  
416-595-1666



# Know your HIV status.

The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested. If you know you have HIV, you can get the treatment and care you need.

It's important to know your status and start treatment as soon as possible, as it can help you to stay healthy, live a long life and avoid passing HIV on to others.

The HIV test involves having some blood taken from your arm or a couple of drops of blood taken from your finger.

After HIV enters the body, it may take time before the test can detect the virus (this is known as the window period). Different HIV tests have different window periods. Some tests can detect HIV as early as 7 days and all tests give accurate results within 3 months.

Don't wait. Speak to a healthcare provider about getting tested for HIV as well as other STIs and hepatitis C.

## You can't tell whether you have been infected with HIV by how you feel.

- Some people have flu-like symptoms when they first get infected (fever, sore throat or swollen glands). But some people have no symptoms at all.
- You can have HIV and not know it.

## If you test positive:

- There have been significant advances in the care and treatment of HIV, and with the right treatment, you can stay healthy.
- To protect yourself and your partner(s), practise safer sex and do not share drug equipment.
- Get connected. Call or email CATIE for information on HIV services in your area or visit [HIV411.ca](http://HIV411.ca).

**About 1 in every 5 Canadians with HIV does not know they have it. The only way to know for sure if you have HIV is to get tested. An HIV test could save your life.**

## Contact information:

### For more information on HIV, contact:

- a public health unit
- your local sexual health or family planning clinic
- your local HIV organization
- an HIV and sexual health hotline
- your doctor or primary healthcare provider
- a community health centre or, in Quebec, a CLSC

## Need more information and resources on HIV or hepatitis C?

Contact CATIE at:  
1-800-263-1638 • [www.catie.ca](http://www.catie.ca)

CATIE accepts collect calls from Canadian prisons.



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