

# THE BASIC FACTS ABOUT HIV

## What is HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus

It is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. Our immune system helps to protect us from illness and keeps us healthy. If left untreated, the HIV virus eventually weakens the immune system so much that it is unable to fight off serious infections and illnesses and this can lead to death.

There is currently no cure for HIV or a vaccine to prevent infection.

## What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

If someone with HIV does not get the treatment they need, their immune system may eventually be so badly damaged that life-threatening illnesses such as rare kinds of cancers, types of pneumonia and brain diseases can develop. These are called AIDS related illnesses.

HIV and AIDS are not the same thing. HIV is the virus that can lead to AIDS.

However, there are drug treatments that can help keep the levels of HIV virus in someone's body at a low level. These drugs can be very successful in helping people who have HIV to remain healthy for a very long time.

## How do people get HIV?

HIV can be passed from person to person through contact with infected bodily fluids. The only bodily fluids where the level and quality of HIV is high enough and strong enough to be infectious are:

- Blood
- Semen (cum)
- Vaginal Fluids
- Breast Milk
- Anal Mucus

The main ways in which people have been infected with HIV are:

- Unprotected sex (i.e. sex without a condom) with someone who has HIV
- Sharing needles and syringes for taking drugs (e.g. heroin, steroids) with someone who has the virus
- From mother to child - although pregnant women who have HIV will be given advice on the best way to not pass the virus on to their baby

other bodily fluids like saliva, sweat and urine the levels of virus are so low and the quality of virus so poor that there is absolutely no chance of being infected with HIV by coming into contact with them.

**You cannot be infected with HIV from:**

- Kissing, hugging, shaking hands or touching someone who has HIV
- Sharing cups or glasses with someone who has HIV
- Eating food that has been prepared by someone who has HIV
- From toilet seats
- From insect bites

## **Preventing HIV**

The majority of people infected with HIV have been infected through having unprotected sex. Using condoms correctly can help protect against the HIV virus. Condoms can also help protect against many other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) including Gonorrhoea, Chlamydia and Syphilis. Condoms are free from most sexual health services.

People who inject drugs should get advice and support on safer drug taking including not sharing needles and injecting equipment with others.

If someone with HIV is diagnosed and given treatment at an early stage, there is a much better chance of keeping the levels of HIV in their body to a very low amount. This means that there would not be enough of the virus in their body to pass HIV on to other people.

**You can get information about HIV and HIV testing from your local sexual health clinic.**

## **How to use a condom**

**With all condoms make sure:-**

- The condom is in date (most condoms have an expiry date)
- You only use condoms that have a CE mark or a BSI kite mark on the packet
- You put the condom in place before there is any genital contact between you and your partner(s)
- You open the condom carefully so as not to damage it - be careful with nails and sharp jewellery that could tear the condom
- You use the condom only once – never use the same one for a second time
- You use water based lubricants with latex condoms – oil based ones can damage the condom
- During sex you should check from time to time that the condom is still in place and has not been damaged
- After ejaculation, hold the base of the condom so that it doesn't come off during withdrawal. Then carefully remove the condom to avoid spillage
- **If a condom breaks or comes off during sex, contact your local sexual health service or your GP for advice**