HIV: Let's Get Talking

Am I likely to get HIV?

Can I get HIV through oral sex?

Find out the facts about HIV so you can get talking at www.nat.org.uk
Tell me about HIV
HIV is a virus that attacks the body’s immune system – the body’s defence against diseases. Eventually, without effective treatment, the immune system will become very weak and will no longer be able to fight off illnesses.

Are HIV and AIDS the same?
No. When someone is described as HIV positive, they have been diagnosed with the HIV virus in their body. A person is considered to have AIDS when the immune system is so weak it can no longer fight off a range of diseases that it would normally cope with. With early treatment most people with HIV in the UK will not develop AIDS.

Is there a cure for HIV?
No, but treatment can keep the virus under control and the immune system healthy. People on HIV treatment can live a healthy, active life, but may suffer side effects from the treatment. If HIV is diagnosed late, treatment may be less effective in preventing related illnesses, and the onset of AIDS. In most cases, with early diagnosis and appropriate treatment, a person living with HIV in the UK can expect to have a near-normal life span.

How is HIV passed on?
HIV can be passed on through infected blood, semen, vaginal and anal fluid secretions or breast milk. The most common ways HIV is passed on are:

- Sex with someone living with HIV without using a condom.
- Sharing infected needles, syringes or other injecting drug equipment.
- From an HIV positive mother to her child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding. However, there are steps mothers can take to reduce the possibility of their unborn child contracting HIV.

Oral sex carries a much lower risk than penetrative sex, but HIV can still be passed on through cuts, gum problems or ulcers in the mouth if they come into contact with infected bodily fluids.
HIV is not passed on through:
- Kissing or touching
- Biting
- Spitting, coughing or sneezing
- Shared utensils
- Shared facilities such as toilet seats or swimming pools

If you are sexually active or use needles or other injecting equipment you could be at risk from getting HIV.

In the UK some groups of people have higher rates of infection, particularly gay and bisexual men and black African men and women. People in these groups who are sexually active, and people having sex with them, are recommended to test regularly for HIV.

Always use a condom when having vaginal or anal sex. A condom is the most effective way to prevent HIV infection during sexual intercourse — other methods are not effective as they do not prevent semen or vaginal fluids coming into contact with the other person. You may also want to use a condom during oral sex although the risk of transmission of HIV is much lower. Always use a condom that meets the British Standard requirements and carries the Kitemark symbol and follow the instructions for use closely. You can get free condoms from a sexual health (GUM) clinic, which you can locate at www.fpa.org.uk/Findaclinic

Never share needles, or any other injecting equipment.

70 to 90 per cent of people with HIV show some early symptoms, usually about 10 days after infection. This is often called primary HIV infection. The most common symptoms are fever, rash and severe sore throat all occurring together. This combination of symptoms is unusual and indicates the need for an HIV test. Such symptoms disappear after two to three weeks and then a person can seem healthy for a number of years.
If you think you have been exposed to the risk of HIV infection you can ask for a free and confidential test at your local sexual health clinic, which you can locate at www.fpa.org.uk/Findaclinic

If it is under 72 hours since possible exposure to HIV you can ask for Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) treatment from a sexual health clinic or Accident & Emergency department. The sooner treatment is begun the higher the probability the treatment will prevent you from becoming infected. Find out more about PEP at www.tht.org.uk/pep

There are over 80,000 people living with HIV in the UK, with more than 7,000 new infections every year. Over a quarter of people living with HIV in the UK don’t know they are infected. Even if someone knows they are living with HIV, they may not feel able to tell you.

People living with HIV worry that friends, family or colleagues will reject them, or they will experience prejudice. People living with HIV can experience discrimination in the workplace, in healthcare settings (e.g. GPs and dentists), from members of their local community and through the media, even though they are protected by law by the Disability Discrimination Act.

HIV prejudice is often the result of ignorance about how HIV is passed on and unfounded fear of becoming infected. Encouraging those around us to talk about HIV and find out the facts can help overcome this.
What’s it like living with HIV?

Everyone’s experience is different. Many people find it difficult to come to terms with their diagnosis. Some people experience prejudice and discrimination from those around them. But some people living with HIV also talk about being empowered by their HIV status, taking the opportunity to educate others and challenge ignorance, and finding strength in themselves to live well.

Some people who need treatment only take one tablet every day at a fixed time. Others may need to take several tablets at the same times every day. Treatment may have side effects such as nausea, diarrhoea, weight loss and changes in body shape.

Many of the groups affected by HIV in the UK, such as gay or bisexual men, black Africans and asylum seekers, already experience prejudice from society. Fear and misunderstanding about HIV can increase prejudice towards these groups.

Relationships can be difficult to begin or maintain as some people feel unable to cope with having a partner who is living with HIV.

Mental health can also be affected as people living with HIV come to terms with their diagnosis, and have to cope with these physical and social issues.

However, many people living with HIV continue to lead active and fulfilling lives – they can work, have relationships, and have children. Many people actually feel better after their diagnosis, as they look after themselves, eat better and lead a healthier lifestyle.

What if someone tells me they have HIV?

If someone has told you they are HIV positive they may be placing a lot of trust in you. It is very important that you keep their trust, and do not pass on this information unless you have their permission. If you have questions or worries that you cannot discuss with them, you can call one of the national helplines, like THT Direct.

There is no need to treat someone living with HIV any differently to how you treat anyone else you know.

Contact details for further advice and information are listed on the back of this leaflet.
What can I do to get people talking about HIV?

Find out more about safer sex and what it means to you. If you have a partner, talk to them about it too. Always practising safer sex demonstrates your concern for yourself and your sexual partner's wellbeing.

Get talking to friends, family and colleagues about HIV.

- Talking can combat ignorance and prejudice, challenge taboos and stigma, and motivate others to find out more information about HIV for themselves.

Get talking to share experiences and knowledge of HIV issues, and educate others about HIV. Take the initiative and lead those around you towards a better understanding of HIV.

For further advice and information:

Find out the facts about HIV so you can get talking at www.nat.org.uk

National Sexual Health Helpline: 0800 567 123

THT Direct: 0845 12 21 200 or email info@ttht.org.uk

Brook: 0808 802 1234 or www.brook.org.uk (sexual health advice for people under 25)

To locate your nearest sexual health clinic visit www.fpa.org.uk/Findaclinic

NAT is the UK's leading charity dedicated to transforming society's response to HIV. We provide fresh thinking, expert advice and practical resources. We campaign for change.

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