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HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. This is a virus that can damage the body's defence system so that it cannot fight off some infections. If someone with HIV goes on to get certain serious illnesses, this condition is called AIDS which stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (sometimes referred to as late stage HIV infection or advanced HIV infection).

In the UK, during 2002, over $5.2$ thousand cases were diagnosed. There is currently no cure for HIV or AIDS and there is no vaccine to prevent people from becoming infected with HIV. Men who have sex with men remain the group most affected in the UK, but more heterosexual men and women have been diagnosed with the virus in recent years. Most of these were infected with the virus outside the UK, in countries which have very high rates of HIV, such as some African countries.

HIV can be transmitted in a number of ways. This leaflet is mostly about sexual transmission. It gives you information about HIV, advice on how to protect yourself, and how to get tested.

**What are HIV and AIDS?**

HIV is a virus which can be passed from one person to another in a number of ways, including through sexual contact.

Anyone who is sexually active can get it. Both men and women can have HIV, and pass it on through sexual contact.

When someone becomes infected with HIV the virus begins to attack their immune system which is the body's defence against infection. Most people with HIV will look and feel healthy, so you cannot tell who has the virus.

You can pass HIV on without knowing you have
the virus because it has no specific symptoms. Once someone is infected with HIV they will remain infected with the virus for the rest of their life. It is estimated that approximately one third of people in the UK who have HIV do not know they have the virus.

Someone infected with HIV is diagnosed as having AIDS when they develop particular illnesses. This is because HIV weakens their immune system to the point at which it has difficulty fighting off infections that would otherwise be controlled by a healthy immune system.

How is HIV passed on?
The only way that HIV is passed from one person to another is if the blood, semen, pre-ejaculate (pre-cum), vaginal fluids or breast milk of an infected person enter the body of an uninfected person
• by having unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex or sharing sex toys with someone who has HIV (unprotected sex means having sex without using a condom)
• by using a needle or syringe (‘works’) which has already been used by someone who is infected with HIV
• when a woman with HIV passes the virus to her baby before or during birth, or by breastfeeding.

There is a risk of catching HIV from unprotected oral sex, although the risk appears to be less than from unprotected anal or vaginal sex. You are more at risk of becoming infected with HIV from oral sex if your throat or mouth is inflamed, or if you have cuts, sores or abrasions in your mouth or on your gums.
In the UK all health professionals – such as dentists, doctors and nurses – are required to follow infection control procedures when caring for any patient. Also, in the UK, blood and organ donors are tested to prevent HIV being transmitted through infected blood, blood products or donated organs. This means that it is now extremely rare to become infected with HIV through receiving healthcare in the UK. It is completely safe to donate blood in the UK.

Some countries do not have the same standards of medical and dental care as the UK, so there may be a risk of getting HIV from infected blood products or unsterile medical equipment. Health advice for travellers is available in the Travel safe leaflet (see page 14 for details).

You cannot get HIV from hugging, kissing, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery.

How can I protect myself from HIV?

• Use a male or female condom every time you have vaginal sex. The spermicide Nonoxynol 9, used to lubricate some condoms, does not protect against HIV and may even increase the risk of infection. If you can, avoid using condoms or spermicide containing Nonoxynol 9.

• Always use condoms for anal sex. Evidence shows that standard strength condoms can be just as effective as extra strong condoms if used with plenty of water-based lubricant. Make sure the condoms and lubricant do not contain Nonoxynol 9.

• For oral sex, cover the penis with a condom. Currently there is little evidence that HIV will
be passed from one person to another when performing oral sex on a woman.

If it's not possible to use a condom for oral sex, try to avoid:
- ejaculation into the mouth
- oral sex with a woman during her period
- oral sex if your throat or mouth is inflamed or you have cuts, sores or abrasions in your mouth or on your gums
- brushing or flossing your teeth before oral sex.

These may increase your chances of transmitting or getting HIV.

- If you are not sure how to use condoms correctly, call fpa (see page 13) for a free leaflet or visit the web-site www.playingsafely.co.uk
- If you’re not happy with the condoms you have tried already, why not try a different brand or type? They come in a variety of shapes, sizes and flavours.
- Avoid sharing sex toys – if they are shared, wash them or cover them with a new condom before anyone else uses them.

If you inject drugs, contact one of the organisations listed on page 14 for advice on how to protect yourself from HIV.

What are the signs and symptoms of HIV?
Some people experience flu-like symptoms a few days or weeks after infection. These may include fever, a rash, swollen glands, a sore throat, mouth or throat ulcers and aching muscles or joints. These
symptoms are sometimes called sero-conversion illness and usually last for about one to two weeks. At least half of newly infected people are thought to experience some of these symptoms, but many people infected with HIV have no symptoms at all or mistake them for flu or other common illnesses. Some people are first diagnosed with HIV when their immune system has become weakened and they become ill.

How will I know if I have the virus?
You won’t know unless you have a test for HIV: this involves giving a blood sample which is then checked for antibodies to HIV. Antibodies are your body’s response to infection with a virus. If HIV antibodies are present then it means that you are infected with HIV (also described as being HIV positive).

If you think you might have been at risk of HIV, you may want to consider having a test, particularly if:

• you have had unprotected sex with a new partner recently
• you or your partner has had unprotected sex with other partners
• a sexual partner tells you they have HIV
• you have shared drug injecting equipment
• you are found to have another STI.

Don’t delay seeking advice – clinics don’t mind doing sexual health check-ups.

How soon after sex can I have a test?
If you are worried about HIV you should seek advice as soon as possible.