HIV
Looking after your sexual health
HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. Once someone is infected with HIV the virus will remain in their body for the rest of their life. There is currently no cure for HIV and no vaccine to prevent people from becoming infected. However, drug treatments can help most people with HIV to live much longer and feel well.

HIV can be transmitted in a number of ways. This leaflet is mostly about sexual transmission. It gives you information about HIV, what you can do if you are worried that you might have the infection and advice on how to protect yourself.

pg Inside this leaflet
3 What causes HIV?
3 How is HIV passed on?
5 Can HIV be passed on when receiving health care in the UK?
5 What are the signs and symptoms of HIV?
6 How will I know if I have HIV?
6 How soon after sex can I have a test?
6 What is an HIV test?
7 What do the test results mean?
8 What does the test involve?
8 How soon will I know the result of the test?
9 Where can I get a test?
10 How accurate are the tests?
10 Will I have to pay for tests and treatment?
10 What is the treatment for HIV?
11 Is there any treatment I can take immediately if I think I have just come into contact with HIV?

12 What happens if HIV isn’t treated?

12 Will I know how long I’ve had HIV?

12 Should I tell my partner?

13 Does anyone else need to know that I have had an HIV test?

13 Does HIV affect fertility?

13 What happens if I am pregnant and I have HIV?

14 How can I help protect myself from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV?

15 Where can I get more information and advice?

16 Helplines and websites

What causes HIV?
HIV is a virus. When someone becomes infected with HIV the virus weakens and damages their body’s defence system (the immune system) so that it cannot fight off infections.

Someone who has HIV is diagnosed as having AIDS only when tests show their immune system has been badly damaged and they develop particular illnesses. These are known as AIDS-defining illnesses, and include recurrent pneumonia and tuberculosis (TB). Taking HIV treatment helps prevent AIDS developing in most people.

How is HIV passed on?
HIV can be passed from one person to another through sexual contact, and in a number of other ways. Both men and women can have HIV, and pass it on. You don’t need to have lots of sexual partners to get HIV or to pass it on.

HIV can be passed on through heterosexual (straight) or homosexual (gay, lesbian) sex. In women who only ever have sex with women the
risk of HIV being passed on is very low. Circumcised and uncircumcised men can get HIV and pass it on. Circumcision is when the foreskin is removed from the penis. Research is looking into whether circumcised men may have less risk of becoming infected with HIV.

Most people with HIV will look and feel healthy, so you cannot tell who has the virus and you can pass on HIV without knowing you have it. HIV can be passed on even if someone is taking anti-HIV drugs.

HIV is passed from one person to another when the blood, semen, pre-ejaculate (pre-cum), vaginal fluids or breast milk of an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person by:
- having unprotected vaginal, anal or oral sex
- sharing sex toys
- using a needle or syringe (‘works’) which has already been used by someone who is infected with HIV.

A woman with HIV can pass the virus to her baby before or during birth, or by breastfeeding.

The risk of catching HIV from unprotected oral sex is low but it can happen. You are more at risk if:
- your throat or mouth is inflamed or you have cuts, sores, abrasions or any unhealed piercing in your mouth
- your partner ejaculates in your mouth
- you have just brushed or flossed your teeth
- you are giving oral sex to a woman who is having her period.

Having another sexually transmitted infection increases the risk of getting HIV or passing HIV on if you already have it. For advice, see page 14.

Although tests can detect HIV in urine and saliva, the level of virus in these fluids is thought to be too low to be infectious.
You cannot get HIV from hugging, kissing, sneezes, coughs, sharing baths or towels, from swimming pools, toilet seats or from sharing cups, plates or cutlery. You cannot get HIV from any animals or insects, including mosquitoes.

Can HIV be passed on when receiving health care in the UK?
It is now extremely rare to become infected with HIV when receiving healthcare in the UK. In the UK all health professionals – such as dentists, doctors and nurses – are required to follow infection control procedures when caring for any patient.

Organ donors and blood from blood donors are also tested in the UK to reduce the risk of HIV being transmitted through infected blood, blood products or donated organs.

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 if you receive health care in another country.

What are the signs and symptoms of HIV?
Many people infected with HIV have no signs and symptoms at all. About half of people who become infected with HIV 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 1–4 weeks.

Some people are first diagnosed with HIV when they become ill due to their immune system becoming weakened.
How will I know if I have HIV?
You can only be certain you have HIV if you have a test. If you or a partner think you might have HIV it is important that you don’t delay getting a test. Even if you don’t have symptoms you may wish to be tested, particularly if:
• you have recently had unprotected sex with a new partner
• a sexual partner tells you they have HIV
• you have shared drug injecting equipment
• you, or your partner, have had unprotected sex with other partners
• you, or your partner, have another sexually transmitted infection
• you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.
Don’t delay seeking advice – clinics don’t mind doing sexual health check-ups.

How soon after sex can I have a test?
It is important not to delay getting a test if you think you might have HIV. You can have a test even if you do not have any signs and symptoms. You will usually be offered an HIV test when you go to the clinic.

The time between coming into contact with HIV and tests being able to detect it in the blood is known as the window period. HIV can still be passed on during the window period even though it can’t be detected. As HIV may not show up on the test straightaway you may be asked to go back for a test three months after you had the sex that put you at risk of HIV.

What is an HIV test?
An HIV test checks your blood for antibodies to HIV. When HIV enters your body, your immune system tries to fight off the infection by producing
antibodies to the virus. It can take between three weeks and three months after you have been infected with HIV for there to be enough antibodies in your blood to show up on an HIV test.

Newer types of HIV tests look for part of the HIV virus known as the p24 antigen as well as looking for HIV antibodies. p24 antigen is a protein which is part of HIV that is produced in large quantities when you have just become infected with HIV. This can be detected in the blood sooner than HIV antibodies. Tests that look for both antibodies and p24 antigen are known as combined antibody/antigen tests.

HIV antibody testing can also be done by taking a sample of saliva but this test is not recommended in the UK.

Cervical screening tests, routine blood tests and swabs do not detect HIV. If you are not sure whether you have been tested for HIV, just ask.

What do the test results mean?
If the result is HIV negative this means that no HIV antibodies or p24 antigen were found in your blood. If the test has been done at least three months after the time of your possible risk of infection, then you do not have HIV. If it was less than three months since the last time you could have been exposed to HIV or you have been at high risk of getting HIV, the test will be repeated at a later appointment.

If the result is HIV positive this means that the test has detected HIV antibodies or p24 antigen in your blood. The test will be repeated to confirm the positive result. If both tests are positive this means you have HIV.