Facts about AIDS, HIV and the test gives you up-to-date information and advice on the questions we are often asked, including:

- What are HIV and AIDS?
- Is there a cure?
- What is safer sex?
- If I stick to one partner, do we need to use condoms?
- How do I decide if I should take the HIV test?
- What do I say, or do, if I know someone has HIV?

HIV and AIDS

- HIV is a virus that can damage the body's defence system so that it cannot fight off certain infections.
- If someone with HIV goes on to get certain serious illnesses, this condition is called AIDS.

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus.
AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

Is there a cure?

At the moment, there is no cure for HIV or AIDS. But there are cures and treatments for many of the illnesses that people with HIV are prone to. There are also combination treatments with anti-retroviral drugs that most people with HIV benefit from, and many people have definite and major health improvements. The drugs reduce the level of HIV in the blood and delay the development of AIDS. Research shows that most people who are on these treatments live longer and feel better. However, the drugs can have unpleasant side effects and different drugs may have to be taken every day. Some people have difficulty coping with this. The long-term effects of being on combination therapy are not yet known.

There is no vaccine against HIV.

How big is the problem?

HIV infection is spread throughout the world. But there are some parts of the world – such as sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Eastern Europe – where known levels of infection are higher than in others. The risk is higher in countries with more people infected with HIV, but the risk of infection is everywhere. Worldwide, the commonest way of becoming infected with HIV is by sex between men and women.

In the UK, over 2500 people test positive for HIV every year and the number of people living with HIV continues to rise with most infections being amongst gay and bisexual men. The rate of HIV infection amongst heterosexual men and women is also rising. Most of these are among people from Sub-Saharan Africa.
How is HIV passed on?

In the UK there are three main ways in which HIV can be passed on by:

* having vaginal or anal sex without a condom with someone who has HIV. Unprotected oral sex also carries some risk;

* a mother with HIV to her baby during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding; and

* sharing needles, syringes or other drug-injecting equipment that is contaminated with HIV infected blood.

You cannot get HIV through:

* kissing, touching, hugging or shaking hands;

* sharing crockery and cutlery;

* coughing or sneezing;

* contact with toilet seats;

* insect or animal bites;

* swimming pools; or

* eating food prepared by someone with HIV.

Is it safe?

Is it safe to give blood?

Donating blood in the UK is completely safe. All equipment is sterile and used only once. If you go to give blood, staff will ask you questions to assess whether you may have come into contact with HIV. If they think you might have been at risk, they will ask you not to give blood.

Is it safe to receive blood?

As an extra safety measure, all blood, blood products, organs and tissues for transplant in the UK are screened for antibodies to HIV. Blood products are also heat-treated.

Can I get HIV from being treated by my doctor or dentist?

Doctors, dentists and other health-care workers use precautions when dealing with patients to prevent any risk of infection.

What about giving first aid?

It makes sense for anyone giving first aid to follow standard hygiene and safety precautions and avoid direct contact with the injured person's blood. If you do get someone else's blood on your skin, simply wash it off.

What if I come across a used needle or syringe?

Don't touch the metal needle. If you are pricked by a used needle, pinch the wound to make it bleed, clean the area and wash it with soap and water. Cover it with a plaster and get medical advice.
What about skin piercing?

Anything that punctures the skin, including tattooing, acupuncture needles and equipment for ear-piercing, body-piercing or removing hair by electrolysis, could pass on HIV and other viruses carried by blood (for example, Hepatitis B and C). Reliable practitioners will use disposable equipment or sterilise it before use. Ask if you are unsure and only go ahead with the procedure if you are satisfied that sterile equipment is being used.

What about medical treatment abroad?

As some countries do not have the same standards of medical and dental care as in the UK, there may be a risk of getting HIV from infected blood transfusions, blood products and from unsterile medical equipment. When you are visiting certain countries, you may want to take your own first-aid kit, including sterile needles and syringes.

For more information and for a free copy of the leaflet, 'Travel safe', please call the National AIDS Helpline free on 0800 567 123. For more advice on any precautions you need to take for your journey, you can call the MASTA Traveller's Helpline (Medical Advisory Services for Travellers Abroad) on 09068 224100. This is a recorded message, so be prepared to leave your name, address and journey details. Calls to this number are charged at 60p a minute.

What about having sex abroad?

Many people work, travel or take holidays abroad. No matter where you are, or how widespread the virus is in the country you're visiting, the main ways of passing on HIV are the same. It's important to plan ahead. If you think you might meet a new partner, take a supply of quality condoms and water-based lubricant with you.

Sex and staying safe

What is safer sex?

In terms of protection against HIV, a simple way of understanding safer sex is to see it as any sex that does not allow an infected partner's blood, semen, or fluid from the vagina to get inside the other partner's body. Some kinds of sex - such as kissing or masturbation - carry no risk of HIV.

What are the riskiest kinds of sex?

Vaginal and anal sex without a condom carry the highest risk. HIV can be passed on to either partner - male or female - during penetrative sex (where the penis enters the vagina, anus or mouth) without a condom.

How safe is oral sex?

Oral sex is where one partner uses their tongue or mouth to stimulate their partner's genitals. There is a small risk of infection through oral sex, but it is less risky than vaginal or anal sex without a condom.

You can reduce this risk by doing the following.

* Avoid getting semen or pre-ejaculatory fluid (pre-cum) in your mouth, particularly if you have any cuts, sores or ulcers in your mouth.

* If the penis is being stimulated during oral sex, consider using a condom.

* Use a dental dam (a latex square) for oral sex with a woman. Hold the dental dam over the woman's genital area to protect you against infection from vaginal fluid and menstrual blood. They are not widely available but you may be able to get them from some sexual health clinics, chemists, shops and some mail-order agencies. Call the National AIDS Helpline for details on freephone 0800 567 123.
How important are condoms?

Condoms provide a very effective barrier against HIV. They also help protect against other sexually transmitted infections as well as unplanned pregnancies.

Condom basics

- Condoms come in a range of shapes, sizes, thicknesses, colours and flavours.
- Always use condoms with the European CE mark or CE and British kitemark.
- Most condoms come already lubricated but some people find using extra water-based lubricant can make sex more comfortable, and help prevent the condom tearing.
- For anal sex always use plenty of water-based lubricant to help prevent the condom splitting.
- There is also a female condom (the Femidom) that fits inside the vagina.
- There is a type of condom (the Avanti) which is made of thin plastic. The Avanti is suitable for most people who are allergic to latex. It is said to reduce the loss of sensitivity that some people complain of with latex condoms. Avanti comes with a CE mark.
- Male and female condoms will only protect you if you use them properly. Check the pack for instructions.
- You may already be using some form of contraception, such as the contraceptive pill. But a good-quality condom, used properly every time you have sex, can help protect you against unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections including HIV.

If I stick to one partner, do we need to use condoms?

If you and your partner are both HIV negative, stay negative, and have not had other sexual partners, then you cannot get HIV through sex. But what if you or your partner have taken risks with injecting drugs, for example, or you are starting a new relationship? If for any reason you’re thinking of not using condoms, consider the following.

- You can have the virus and look and feel fit and healthy.
- Many people may not know for sure whether they or their partner have HIV.
- The only way to find out if you’re both HIV negative is to have an HIV test.

And if I don’t stick to one partner?

Always use condoms with other partners you may have.

The more partners you have unprotected sex with, the more likely you are to come into contact with HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.

Remember – condoms also protect against other sexually transmitted infections and unplanned pregnancy.