

HIV -

WHAT IS HIV?

HIV stands for Human Immunodeficiency Virus. HIV affects the body's immune system, attacking the body's defences against disease making it less able to fight infections and more vulnerable to illnesses.

If left untreated, HIV can cause AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) seriously harming the body's immune system, resulting in serious illness and disease. AIDS can only develop in someone already infected with HIV, but not everyone who has HIV develops AIDS. In Ireland, because of good treatments now available for HIV, most don't.

HIV treatment is more effective the earlier it starts, which is why it's important for people who may be at risk to get tested.

HOW DOES SOMEONE GET HIV?

The HIV virus is found in semen, blood, rectal fluids, vaginal fluids and breast milk.

The most common ways of getting HIV is through unprotected anal sex without a condom, by sharing syringes or needles to inject drugs or by sharing sex toys without using condoms.

HIV infection can be hard to spot in its early stages. Left untreated, a person with HIV will become very unwell over time.

You cannot get HIV:

- From sharing food, cooking or eating utensils
- From kissing
- From shaking hands or hugging
- From the toilet or swimming pools
- From spitting or biting
- From sneezing

It is extremely unlikely that you will get HIV from oral sex although there is a theoretical risk if you have open sores in your mouth.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

HIV needs to be diagnosed by a blood test.

The vast majority of people with HIV will not have any symptoms for many years. Some people will experience 'Serconversion Illness' about 4 - 6 weeks after infection with the HIV virus. The symptoms of seroconversion illness are similar to the common flu. Having 'flu-like symptoms' does not mean you have HIV. The only way to know is to have a HIV test.

If you or your partner think you may have been infected with HIV, it is important for both of you to get tested.

HIV can be present for years before health problems begin. However, the person with HIV can still pass on the virus to other people during this time and their immune system will slowly become more and more damaged.

If detected early, medicines should help the person with HIV stay well and lead a healthy and normal life. This is why it's important for anyone who has been at risk of catching HIV to regularly get tested.

Most people with HIV in Ireland catch the infection through unprotected sex or by sharing needles used to inject drugs.

WHAT DOES A HIV TEST INVOLVE?

Testing for HIV is straightforward, highly accurate and is the only way to know if you are infected. If you have never tested for HIV you should consider getting a test.

Also consider a test if you've been tested before, but in the last three – six months:

- you've had unprotected sex with a new partner
- you've shared injecting equipment

Because HIV can be passed through sexual intercourse, if you are thinking about having sex without a condom you should consider testing both you and your partner before doing so.

You can be tested for HIV at your local sexual health service and by your GP. Many sexual health charities also offer free testing. A full list of testing centres are available [here](#).

Tests at public sexual health clinics are completely free and confidential. A HIV test involves taking a small amount of blood from you, usually from your arm or your finger. You may get the result straight away or you may have to wait for them to send the sample to a laboratory for testing. Either way they will let you know your result and what this means. If you have any questions just ask the person taking the test or giving the result.

If you contract HIV, your body reacts to the infection and produces 'antibodies'. The test looks to see if you have these HIV antibodies in your blood. If you do have HIV antibodies this means you have HIV.

WHAT IF THE RESULT IS HIV POSITIVE?

If your test shows that you have HIV, you will be referred to a specialist for further advice, support and treatment. All of this is free.

Having HIV may be a shock but remember it is a manageable condition and there are treatments that can help you stay healthy and well and live for a normal life span.

Find out more on your HIV status

WHAT IF THE RESULT IS HIV NEGATIVE?

This means that you do not have HIV. This is a really good opportunity to learn more about how to remain negative. Take some time to learn how to prevent HIV and other STIs by reading through our prevention section.

It can take two to three months after you come into contact with HIV for the test to detect antibodies. If your most recent exposure to HIV was within the last three months you can test straight away as HIV antibodies can show up earlier, but you will be advised to have another test three months after your last risk to be entirely sure.

WHAT DOES TREATMENT INVOLVE?

Although there is no cure for HIV, there are effective treatments available that allow people with the condition to stay well and to lead normal healthy lives.

The sooner treatment starts, the more effective it can be.

HIV is treated with a range of drugs that reduces the level of virus in your blood and can therefore prevent the virus from causing health problems for many years but you need to keep taking them for them to continue working.

Nowadays many people just take one pill every day and see a specialist at the hospital every 3-6 months for a check-up.

Regular blood testing to look at the amount of virus in the blood is used to show whether the treatment is working or whether a change in medicines is needed. One of the main goals in using these drugs is to become undetectable – this will have a positive impact on your health and means you will not pass the virus on to anyone else. Find out more about viral load and HIV transmission.

HOW CAN I PREVENT HIV?

There are a number of ways to prevent HIV:

1. Condoms: Using condoms and lube consistently each time you have sex.
2. PEP: HIV medication taken within 72 hours of exposure to HIV and continued for 28 days.
3. PrEP: HIV medication taken daily to prevent HIV infection (not yet available in Ireland).
4. Considering viral load levels: An undetectable viral load means the risk of transmission is negligible.
5. Strategic Positioning: HIV positive men assuming the 'bottom' position during unprotected anal sex with a HIV negative man – a somewhat reduced risk, however transmission can occur.

Find out more about prevention [here](#).

WHAT IS UNDETECTABLE?

Viral load is the term used to describe the amount of HIV in the body at any one time. It is determined with a blood test.

A higher viral load is associated with a higher risk of HIV transmission. With successful HIV treatment, the viral load can become so low that it is considered 'undetectable' in the blood, and this reduces the risk of HIV transmission to zero. The amount of virus in the blood is usually the same as the viral load in other bodily fluids – semen, vaginal fluid and rectal fluid (the fluids commonly associated with the sexual transmission of HIV). This means that when the viral load in the blood decreases, it generally also decreases in other fluids. However, the viral load in each of the bodily fluids can sometimes be different.

For many people on long term HIV treatment, with an undetectable viral load, with no other concurrent STIs, the risk of transmitting the virus to a partner(s) is zero.

A lot of people with HIV see becoming undetectable as a very important benefit of HIV treatment, which decreases anxiety about onward transmission to a sexual partner. People are now taking their viral load into consideration when thinking about safer sex.

If you want to stop using condoms, it is important to discuss this carefully with your partner(s) and ensure they are also comfortable with the decision. This information may be new to a lot of people who do not have HIV; it may take time for someone to understand and trust what you are saying. It is also important to remember that while using this approach will protect your partner(s) from HIV, it does not protect them or you from other STIs.

The following are some guidelines for men who may be thinking about using this approach to reduce the risk of HIV transmission:

- the viral load can increase if doses of HIV treatment are missed. Take pills exactly as prescribed. Adherence to treatment is critical to keep the viral load undetectable;
- check to make sure the blood viral load is undetectable before starting this approach, and get regular viral load tests to ensure it remains undetectable;
- as a guideline, it is suggested that you and your partner(s) wait until your viral load has been undetectable for at least six months before making any decisions about whether to stop using condoms;
- get tested regularly for STIs. If either partner has an STI, start treatment immediately and consider using condoms during this time as viral load may spike;
- if you have not already done so, get vaccinations for hepatitis A and B;
- use other HIV prevention strategies as much as possible. This will help reduce the overall risk of HIV transmission.

If you use this approach without disclosing your HIV status, it is important to remember that in some countries, having sex without condoms without disclosing that you are HIV positive is a criminal offence, regardless of the likelihood of HIV transmission.