

What is HIV?



TULANE
Campus Health
—
The Health Center
for Student Care

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system. Without treatment, it can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome).

There is currently no cure for HIV, but proper medical care can control the virus. People living with HIV who receive effective HIV treatment can live long, healthy lives and protect their partners.

Symptoms

How do I know if I have HIV? Most people have flu-like symptoms within 2 to 4 weeks after being infected with HIV. These symptoms may last for a few days or several weeks. However, having these symptoms alone doesn't necessarily mean you have HIV. Other illnesses can cause similar symptoms. Some people with HIV have no symptoms at all. The only way to know if you have HIV is to get tested.

How It Spreads

How is HIV spread? HIV is most commonly transmitted through anal or vaginal sex, or by sharing needles, syringes, or other drug injection equipment.

Only certain body fluids can transmit HIV. These fluids include:

- Blood
- Semen (cum)
- Pre-seminal fluid (pre-cum)
- Rectal fluids
- Vaginal fluids

These fluids must come in contact with a mucous membrane or damaged tissue or be directly injected into the bloodstream for transmission to occur.

Factors like a person's viral load, other sexually transmitted infections (STIs), having sex with multiple partners, having sex without using condoms, and alcohol or drug use can increase the chances of getting or transmitting HIV.

Prevention

How can I reduce my risk of getting HIV? There are more tools than ever to help prevent HIV transmission, including:

- Using condoms the right way every time you have sex
- Never sharing needles, syringes, or other drug injection equipment
- Using PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis)

If you have HIV, there are many ways to prevent transmitting HIV to others, including taking HIV treatment to achieve and maintain an undetectable viral load.

Testing

Should I get tested for HIV? The only way to know your HIV status is to get tested. Everyone between the ages of 13 and 64 should get tested for HIV at least once. People with certain risk factors should get tested more often. Knowing your HIV status helps you take steps to stay healthy and prevent transmission to others.

There are many options for quick, free, and painless HIV testing. If your test result is positive, you can take medicine to treat HIV and live a long, healthy life. If your test result is negative, you can take steps to prevent HIV.

Treatment

Is there a cure for HIV? There is currently no cure for HIV, but HIV treatment (antiretroviral therapy or ART) can reduce the amount of HIV in the blood (viral load). With effective treatment, the viral load can become so low that it's undetectable on a test. If you have an undetectable viral load, you cannot transmit HIV to others through sex. Having an undetectable viral load also lowers the chances of HIV transmission through sharing drug injection equipment or during pregnancy, labor, and delivery.

You should start HIV treatment as soon as possible after being diagnosed.

How HIV Progresses

Without treatment, HIV typically progresses through three stages, but effective HIV treatment can slow or prevent progression of the disease.

Stage 1: Acute HIV Infection

- People have a high amount of HIV in their blood and are highly contagious.
- Many people experience flu-like symptoms.
- If you have flu-like symptoms and think you may have been exposed to HIV, get tested.

Stage 2: Chronic HIV Infection

- Also called asymptomatic HIV infection or clinical latency.
- HIV continues to reproduce in the body, but people may not have symptoms or get sick during this phase.
- People who take HIV treatment as prescribed may never progress to Stage 3 (AIDS).
- Without treatment, this stage may last for years or progress more quickly.

Stage 3: Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS)

- The most severe stage of HIV infection.
- People with AIDS have a damaged immune system and can get serious illnesses.
- If untreated, people with AIDS typically survive for about three years.
- People with AIDS have a high viral load and can easily transmit HIV to others.

Have any questions?

Reach out to your provider in one of two ways:

- Call **504-865-5255** and ask to leave a message for your provider OR
- Send a secure message through the **Patient Portal** (campushealth.tulane.edu/patient-portal).