

AIDS

Family Health Center
606 N Third Avenue Suite #101 - Sandpoint, Idaho 83864 - Telephone (208) 263-1435

What is it?

AIDS (**A**cquired **I**mmune **D**eficiency **S**ndrome) is a disease resulting from a decrease in immune system function. A healthy immune system is what keeps people from getting sick.

When people have AIDS, their bodies can't fight disease. They usually die from serious "opportunistic" infections or cancers that are either not found or produce only mild illness in individuals with normal immune systems.

What causes it?

AIDS is caused by a virus called HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus). HIV virus is passed in the semen, vaginal fluid, and blood of HIV infected people. HIV attacks the body's immune system and destroys the cells that defend the body. Disease and infections then move in without a fight. These infections are called "opportunistic" because they use the opportunity of illness to attack.

Who gets it?

HIV can only be passed from person to person through body fluids, like blood, semen, and vaginal fluid. Most people with HIV or AIDS got the virus because they had a specific risk factor.

Risk factors for AIDS

- Sex with a prostitute (man or woman)
- Male sex with another man
- Multiple sex partners
- Other sexually transmitted diseases
- Sex for drugs or money
- Shared needles to use drugs
- Blood transfusion or blood product transfusion between 1977 and 1985

The most common ways to catch AIDS are:

1. By having unprotected anal, vaginal, or oral sex with an infected person
2. By sharing needles and syringes used for injecting drugs with an infected person
3. By transmitting the virus to a baby during pregnancy from an infected mother

Unlike many other viruses, HIV does not spread by traveling through the air. HIV is very fragile and dies quickly outside the human body. Also, skin without cuts or sores helps prevent germs - including HIV - from infecting us. Therefore, HIV can not be spread through casual contact.

Things that don't cause AIDS

- Shaking hands
- Hugging
- Coughing or sneezing
- Kissing
- Swimming pools or hot tubs
- Toilet seats
- Food
- Straws, spoons or cups
- Mosquitoes
- Animals
- Donating blood
- Public telephones
- Water fountains

What are the symptoms?

You can't tell who's infected with AIDS by how they look. Most people infected with the HIV virus look and feel healthy. It takes an average of 8 years for symptoms to develop after being infected with HIV. The virus acts like a time bomb, quietly ticking away before showing any signs. Today, about 1 to 1.5 million people in the United States have HIV. They can spread the virus to others without even knowing they have it themselves.

When symptoms of HIV do appear, they vary from person to person. Some develop symptoms which may include fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, unexplained

weight loss, night sweats, diarrhea, swollen glands, cough, skin lesions, and yeast infections (not vaginal). People who have these symptoms for more than 2 weeks should see a doctor for medical evaluation.

How do you prevent it?

Very simply, you must never share needles or syringes used for drugs and you must avoid any risky sexual activity.

No sex is completely safe. The safest kind of sex is sex between two people who don't have HIV infection, are faithful to each other, and don't abuse injectable drugs. If you have any doubts about whether your partner is infected or whether he/she is not having sex with anyone else at all, use latex condoms every time you have sex.

Never let someone else's blood, semen, urine, vaginal fluid, or feces get into your anus, vagina, or mouth. Latex condoms should be used during all sex acts, including anal, vaginal, and oral sex.

Even latex condoms are not 100% effective. How well they work depends on if you use them right. Follow the directions on the package and the suggestions below.

Tips on using condoms

- Latex or polyurethane condoms should be used. Condoms made from natural membranes, like sheep gut, aren't as good, because HIV is small enough to get through the tiny pores of these condoms.
 - Condoms should be put on an erect penis and unrolled to the base before any contact
 - A space, without an air bubble, should be left at the end of the condom to catch semen.
 - Only water-based lubricants should be used. Oil based lubricants such as petroleum jelly (Vaseline), mineral oil, and massage oils can damage the latex.
 - After ejaculation the penis should be withdrawn while still erect. Hold the condom against the base of the penis so it doesn't slip off while withdrawing.
 - Don't reuse condoms.

Can it be treated?

Currently most treatments focus on the secondary illnesses that occur as a result of a weakened immune system. Some combinations of medicines have prolonged the lives of people with AIDS by slowing the growth of the HIV virus, but no cure or vaccine is available or likely to become available in the near future.

Should I be tested for HIV?

You should consider being tested for HIV infection if you have any risk factors, or you are pregnant or plan to be pregnant. Talk to your family doctor about the concerns you have. He/she can help you decide.

Most HIV tests done by your doctor are accurate if you have them done three months after you think you may have been infected. The blood tests for HIV look for *antibodies* to the virus. These antibodies are made by the body after HIV infection, so the test isn't accurate until the virus has been in the body long enough for antibodies to be made. Even so, the test can give false results occasionally.

Are there complications?

As previously mentioned, there are many serious opportunistic infections which strike HIV individuals once their immune system is impaired. These include *Pneumocystis pneumonia*, fungal infections, tuberculosis, shingles, and other viral diseases as well as several cancers including Kaposi's sarcoma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, or primary brain lymphoma.

There is no cure for AIDS. Even though there are some drugs available today which may prolong life, most individuals infected with HIV will eventually die from AIDS.

In summary

- AIDS is a life threatening disease that damages the immune system of otherwise healthy people.
- Most people with AIDS got the virus by having sex or sharing drug needles with someone who already had the HIV virus.
- Most people with HIV don't know they're infected.
- There is no cure for AIDS.
- The safest kind of sex is between two people who don't have HIV infection, are faithful, and don't abuse injectable drugs.
- You should consider being tested for HIV infection if you have any risk factors, or you are pregnant or plan to be pregnant.
- For more information call the Idaho AIDS hotline, 1-800-667-2437 or the National AIDS hotline, 1-800-342-AIDS.