

GETTING the FACTS about HIV & AIDS!

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus)

Your immune system keeps your body strong and free of infections. It is like a guard against disease. When you get infected with HIV, your immune system can be weakened, making you more vulnerable to infections and diseases. HIV infects and kills the cells that help your immune system detect infection and disease and fight against it. These cells are called CD4, or t-cells. HIV lives in the bodily fluids (like blood, pre-ejaculate fluid, breast milk, vaginal secretions and semen) and is transmitted if you come in contact with fluids from a person with HIV.

The main ways that HIV is transferred is through **sexual contact** without a condom. To protect against this happening, you must use a male or female condom every time you have sex, or abstain from sex. There is also a risk of transmitting HIV through unprotected oral sex, although the risk is lower. Oral sex can be risky for the person using his/her mouth when there are open sores in the mouth or bleeding gums, or when semen enters the mouth and when any secretions are swallowed.

Other ways that HIV is transmitted:

- Blood and Blood Contact
- Mother-to-child transmission (MTCT)

Blood Contact can occur through sharing needles and equipment used for injection drugs, through organ transplants or blood transfusions, and through sharing tattoo or skin piercing equipment. To avoid these transmission routes, you should never share needles or any equipment that comes in contact with blood.

HIV can also be passed from mother to child during **pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding**.

If you are pregnant and HIV positive or want to get tested, you should speak with a health care provider or AIDS clinic to find out what you can do before the baby is born to reduce infection. They can also advise you on how to prepare formula for your baby instead of using breast-milk, which is another route in which HIV is transmitted.

Even if you have HIV, you can keep your immune system strong by staying healthy, exercising and eating well. Having HIV doesn't mean your life is over. You can still enjoy a happy, healthy life if you take good care of yourself and keep your immune system strong.



see next page for info on AIDS...