

## AIDS and HIV

AIDS is a very serious contagious disease, which can infect anyone. AIDS stands for Acquired (gotten from someone else) Immuno Deficiency (abnormal immunity to infection and cancer) Syndrome (a disease with many problems). AIDS is caused by infections with HIV, Human Immunodeficiency Virus. Persons infected with HIV seem normal early on, but go in months or years to develop AIDS. Even before symptoms of AIDS develop, persons infected with HIV can pass on the virus to others.

Parents should teach their children about avoiding HIV infection. By preschool age, children can understand they should never touch another person's blood or sores, and never touch needles or syringes.

By age 8-12, children should be taught that drug use, especially drugs injected with needles, is an extremely high risk for HIV infection. Any sharing of needles or sharp objects that cut skin (razors) is dangerous, including body piercing and tattooing. Using non-injected drugs, including alcohol, is also a risk for HIV infection since judgment is altered.

Adolescents must also understand that, in addition to blood, HIV is spread through semen (sperm) and vaginal secretions. The best protection is to abstain from sexual activity, including genital, oral, and anal sex. Teens who decide to be sexually active can reduce their risk by using a latex condom and by avoiding multiple partners.

HIV can be contracted through a transfusion or transplant, though newer lab tests screen donors and risk is extremely low. HIV can also be transmitted by an infected pregnant or breast-feeding mother to her baby.

An understanding of how HIV is not spread is also important. HIV cannot be spread by touching or hugging, or by eating food prepared by an HIV-positive person. Sharing bathrooms does not transmit HIV. Also, you cannot get HIV from giving blood, swimming pools, through the air, or from insect bites.

Symptoms of AIDS include recurring unusual infections (not common colds), weight loss, persistent gland swellings, and poor growth or development.

Because new drug treatments are effective when begun early on, diagnosing HIV infection as early as possible is important. If you have risks for HIV infections (as above) you should be tested. Experts recommend that *everyone* have a test for HIV between the ages of 15 and 65. (At HPA we take confidentiality in testing seriously).

Many people are uncomfortable discussing HIV and AIDS, but it is critically important that children understand how to protect themselves.

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