

# HIV/AIDS

## FACT SHEET

### What is HIV/AIDS?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. HIV is a virus that attacks the body's immune system and if left untreated can lead to AIDS. AIDS stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. AIDS is a syndrome in which the HIV has damaged the body's immune system, making individuals more vulnerable to infections and diseases. With current, highly effective HIV treatments, AIDS is extremely rare in Australia.

### What are the symptoms?

Symptoms of HIV vary from person to person but the first signs of infection will generally happen within the first 1-2 months. Many, but not all, people will experience severe flu-like symptoms which is your body's natural response to the virus. This is called the 'seroconversion' period and may last a few days to several weeks.

Flu-like symptoms can include fever, chills, rash, night sweats, muscle aches, sore throat, fatigue, swollen lymph nodes and mouth ulcers.

Once the seroconversion period has passed you may not have any symptoms at all. The virus is still present but your body is not reacting to it. Without treatment some people can stay in this stage for 10-15 years. Without HIV treatment the virus will eventually weaken your body's immune system and this will lead to AIDS. AIDS is diagnosed when someone has acquired one or more of a list of infections called AIDS defining illnesses, and the symptoms will depend on which infection is present.

### How is HIV spread?

HIV is passed on through penetrative sex (vaginal or anal), blood-to-blood contact or breastfeeding. HIV can be present in three kinds of bodily fluids: blood, sexual fluids and breast milk.

HIV is spread in three main ways:

- blood to blood contact (sharing injecting, tattooing or piercing equipment)
- sexual contact (anal or vaginal sex without a condom)
- parent to child (during pregnancy, child birth or breastfeeding).

It is extremely rare that HIV is transmitted by:

- vaginal or anal sex if condoms have been used correctly
- oral sex without a condom
- skin splashes with HIV infected body fluids

HIV can NOT be transmitted via other body fluids such as saliva, urine, sweat, etc. nor can it be transmitted by other types of casual contact (such as sharing cups, cutlery, toilet seats, etc.).

### When should I have a HIV test?

HIV can affect anyone. In Australia there are groups of people more commonly diagnosed with HIV. HIV testing is also recommended for certain situations such as during pregnancy. People who should be offered testing for HIV include:

- gay men and other men who have sex with men
- people who share injecting equipment
- people with multiple sexual partner/s or recent partner change
- people having travelled to or from countries of high HIV prevalence
- sexual partner/s of people living with HIV or at risk of HIV
- pregnant people
- anyone diagnosed with another STI

Ultimately anyone can ask for a HIV test.

## How is HIV tested?

HIV can be detected with a blood test which detects HIV antibodies. These antibodies are not detectable immediately after exposure to HIV, this is called the window period. The test is usually positive within 6 weeks of infection but occasionally longer. Some clinics offer rapid HIV testing using blood or saliva. These tests can have a result within 10-20 minutes but are not as accurate and still need a standard blood test to confirm the result. HIV self-testing (also known as home-based testing) is also now available in Australia and involves a finger-prick blood test. As with rapid testing the result must be confirmed by a standard blood test.

## How is HIV treated?

Although getting an HIV positive test result can be a life-changing experience, in Australia it no longer means a death sentence. Effective antiretroviral medications are available, and the sooner you start treatment, the better your health outcomes will be in the long term. With early and continued treatment, people living with HIV can reach a normal life expectancy.

Your recent sexual partner/s will need to be notified so they can also be tested and if necessary receive treatment. You may need to trace to your last negative HIV test. Your doctor or nurse can help you with notifying sexual partner/s and there are websites where partner notification can be done anonymously.

HIV is a notifiable STI. This means that the doctor has a legal requirement to notify the Department of Health of the HIV infection. This information will be confidential.

## Prevention of HIV

- Use condoms, dams and gloves when you have sex.
- Practise safer sex. Make sure semen, blood, vaginal or anal fluid are not passed between partners.
- Don't share injecting equipment.
- Talk about any past infections with your sexual partner/s.
- Get tested regularly.

There are now a number of medication options to prevent HIV transmission.

**PEP** (post-exposure prophylaxis) is a course of anti-HIV drugs that may stop HIV infection if it is started soon after exposure to HIV. It needs to be started within 72 hours of possible HIV exposure and taken every day for 4 weeks. The sooner it is started within 72 hours the more effective it is.

**PrEP** (pre-exposure prophylaxis) is a pill taken every day for people who are HIV negative but wish to reduce their risk of acquiring HIV. PrEP can be prescribed by a general practitioner and safely taken long term for most people.

**UVL** (undetectable viral load) is when someone is living with HIV but the levels of virus in the blood are so low they can't be detected. This is important for the person living with HIV but is also a highly effective method of preventing HIV transmission. Current studies show it's nearly impossible for someone with a UVL to transmit HIV. UVL is sometimes also known as TasP (treatment as prevention). UVL is also referred to in the message of **U=U** (undetectable equals untransmittable).

## Where can I get tested?

You can visit SHINE SA for further information, testing and treatment. Rapido - Rapid HIV testing is available at SHINE SA Hyde Street, call 7099 5300 to book.

You can also connect with the following services:

- your local doctor, health care provider or Aboriginal Health service
- Adelaide Sexual Health Centre: drop in or phone 275 North Terrace, Adelaide  
Tel: 7117 2800
- SAMESH  
SAMESH provides services for people at risk of contracting HIV and people living with HIV  
57 Hyde Street, Adelaide  
Tel: 7099 5300
- PEP Hotline  
Open 24/7  
Tel: 1800 022 226

CONTACT  
SHINE SA

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SHINE SA fact sheets are regularly reviewed and updated. To download the most recent version visit [www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)

### Clinic & Counselling Appointments and General Enquiries

Tel 1300 794 584

Clinic locations and times are available at [www.shinesa.org.au](http://www.shinesa.org.au)

### Sexual Healthline

Tel 1300 883 793 **Country callers (toll free)** 1800 188 171

Talk to a sexual health nurse about any sexual health issue.

Available 9am – 12.30pm, Monday – Friday

### National Relay Service

[www.relayservice.gov.au](http://www.relayservice.gov.au)

133 677 (TTY/Voice) 1300 555 727 (Speak & Listen) 0423 677 767 (SMS Relay)