

# *F a c t s*

*ESW – Emergency Service Workers /  
HCW – Health Care Workers*



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## HIV / AIDS

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**Disclaimer:** This fact sheet provides basic general information only and is to be used as a quick guide, not as a complete resource on the subject. If you have any further questions, ask your health care provider or Infection Prevention and Control advisor.

### **What are HIV and AIDS?**

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) is the virus that causes AIDS. HIV kills certain blood cells that are needed for the immune system to protect the body against illness.

AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome) occurs when the immune system is damaged by HIV to the point where a person develops any number of infections and diseases.

### **What are the symptoms?**

After becoming infected with HIV, some people experience a brief flu-like illness that may include weight loss, swollen glands, diarrhea, fatigue, fever, chills, and sweats. Most people feel completely well and have no symptoms for a long time.

Once infected with HIV, the virus continues to attack the immune system, putting the person at risk for other infections and illnesses. These opportunistic illnesses include tuberculosis, pneumonia and cancer. A person with AIDS likely has periods of good health in between serious illnesses.

### **How is it detected?**

HIV infection is usually detected through a blood test or a sample of oral fluid. If the sample contains HIV antibodies (proteins the body produces to fight the infection), the person is considered HIV-positive. Great care is taken to protect the identity of the person being tested. Early testing and diagnosis are crucial. The earlier HIV is detected, the better the prognosis and chance for living a long and healthy life.

### **How is transmitted?**

HIV is a fragile virus that cannot survive well outside the body. It cannot be passed on to others through casual, everyday contact. Body fluids that have enough of the virus in them to infect someone are blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. HIV infection can occur when one of these infected body fluids comes into contact with another's body in a way that allows the virus to enter the bloodstream.

# **Health & Environment Facts**

HIV can enter the body through a vein, the mouth, or other mucous membranes (e.g. eyes, inside of nose), or through cuts, rashes, sores or a break in the skin of the anus, rectum, vagina or penis. HIV can be spread by:

- sexual intercourse (anal, vaginal, oral) with an HIV-infected person,
- sharing needles for injection, smoking and snorting equipment with someone who is infected with HIV,
- HIV-positive women to babies before or during birth, or through breast-feeding,
- contaminated equipment used for piercing and tattooing, and
- transfusions of infected blood or blood products. This type of spread is very rare in countries like Canada, where blood is screened for HIV antibodies.

## **How is it treated?**

At this time, there is no cure for AIDS. However there are medications and treatments which can control or prevent opportunistic infections. Progress has been made in producing effective drugs that fight HIV directly. Antiretroviral (ARV) medicines can keep HIV levels low and prolong life for persons with AIDS by interfering with reproduction of the virus. Combination therapy is a course of ARV treatment that involves two or more ARVs in combination. Medications should be taken exactly as prescribed.

## **How is HIV prevented?**

Prevention of HIV includes the following:

- refraining from unprotected sexual intercourse with someone infected with HIV,
- using latex condoms consistently and correctly,
- for people who inject, inhale or snort drugs, using clean equipment and syringes, and not sharing equipment or syringes with others,
- for people getting a tattoo or piercing, seeking out a reputable business and making sure sterile needles and equipment are used.

Many communities, including those in Grey Bruce, have needle-exchange programs where drug users can exchange used needles for clean, new syringes and equipment at no cost.

## **Living with HIV**

For HIV-positive persons to stay healthy, they should:

- talk to their physician about testing and treatment, ask questions and keep their appointments,
- begin treatment promptly and take medications as directed,
- get immunized to prevent illnesses like the flu and pneumonia,
- use condoms to avoid other sexually transmitted diseases,
- avoid smoking and drugs other than those prescribed,
- eat healthy foods to stay strong and help the body protect itself, and
- exercise regularly, get enough sleep and rest, and find ways to manage stress.

For more information call Public Health at (519) 376-9420 or 1-800-263-3456.

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