



HIV Basics

HIV Questions and Answers



Do you know how to protect yourself from HIV and AIDS?

Learn what you can do to stay healthy and help stop the spread of HIV.

What are HIV and AIDS?

- HIV is the virus that causes AIDS.
- AIDS is a late-stage disease that involves severe damage to the immune system.

Does a person with HIV always have AIDS?

- No. People can live for years with HIV without getting AIDS, especially if they receive treatment.
- Sometimes people have HIV for years and do not show any signs or symptoms.

Is there a cure?

- There is not a cure for HIV or AIDS, but there are many effective treatments for HIV infection.
- People with HIV can get free or low-cost medical care to help them live long and healthy lives.

How is HIV spread?

- Through blood, semen, fluid from the vagina, and breast milk.
- Having vaginal or anal sex without a condom.
- Sharing needles and works when injecting drugs.
- Contact with blood from another person.
- Women with HIV can pass the virus to their children before or during birth or when they breastfeed.

Is there a link between HIV and other diseases?

- Yes. Unprotected sex can also put you at risk for sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhea, syphilis, chlamydia, herpes, and genital warts.
- People who have a sexually transmitted disease can get and pass HIV much more easily than people who don't.
- Contact with blood from another person can also spread hepatitis B or C.

Can HIV be spread in other ways?

- You cannot get HIV from casual contact like a hug or a handshake or by sharing a glass with someone who has the virus.
- You cannot get HIV from someone coughing or sneezing.
- HIV can sometimes be spread through oral sex, but it is low risk.

Am I at risk?

- Any time you have sex with a man or a woman or share needles you may be at risk for getting or passing HIV.
- Your risk goes up each time you take part in these behaviors.
- If your partner has sex or shares needles with other people, it increases your risk.

How can I lower my HIV risk?

Here are three ways to reduce your risk:

- Use condoms *every time* you have sex.
- Have oral sex instead of anal or vaginal sex.
- Reduce your number of sex partners.

Here are some other things you can do:

- Know your own and your partner's HIV and STD status and level of risk. This can help you make smart choices about sex with your partner.
- If your partner has HIV, do what you can to help him or her get treatment and stay healthy.



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If you inject drugs, these steps might help cut your risk:

- Use a new sterile needle and syringe each time you inject drugs. You can get clean needles at many pharmacies in Massachusetts or from needle exchange programs.
- Do not share needles, cotton, cookers, or other equipment.
- If you must share, share with as few people as possible. Clean needles and equipment between uses.
- If you do re-use needles or syringes, clean them before each use by first rinsing them with water three times. Then fill with bleach, shake for two minutes, get rid of the bleach, then repeat two more times with new bleach. Rinse with water three times.



What should I know about HIV if I am pregnant or thinking about getting pregnant?

- Women with HIV can pass it to their children before or during birth or through breastfeeding.
- Learn your HIV status. If you are at risk for HIV, you may want to get tested more than once.
- If you are HIV positive and pregnant, you can take certain medicines to reduce the risk of passing HIV to your baby. Most babies born to women who have received treatment do not get HIV.
- Bottle-feed with formula instead of breastfeed so that you don't pass HIV to your baby.

Why should I get tested?

- A test is the only way to know for sure if you have HIV.
- All test sites can point the way to medical care and support services to help you stay healthy.
- Since people sometimes pass on HIV even if they do not have any symptoms, knowing your HIV status can help you prevent passing HIV to your partner.

Where can I go to get an HIV test?

- You can get tested at your doctor's office.
- There are also test sites across Massachusetts.
- Some sites offer tests where they give you a number instead of using your name.
- To find a test site near you, ask your health care provider, call 800-235-2331, or go to www.mass.gov/dph/aids.

What else should I know about HIV testing?

- No one can force you to take a test, and you must give written consent before one is performed.
- There are different kinds of tests. Some test your blood, others use a swab to take fluids from your mouth. There is also a rapid test that gives you a result the same day.
- Test sites often offer screening for other sexually transmitted diseases and hepatitis.



Where can I get more information?

AIDS Action Hotline

English and Español: 800-235-2331
TTY: 617-437-1672
www.aac.org

Massachusetts Substance Abuse Information Help Line

English and Español: 800-327-5050
TTY: 617-536-5872

