

HIV

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that weakens your immune system and increases your risk of serious illness. There's currently no cure, but with treatment most people with HIV can live a long and healthy life.

AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome) is the name for a collection of serious illnesses caused by the HIV virus. AIDS is now often called late-stage or advanced HIV. In the UK, most people being treated for HIV do not develop AIDS.

Causes of HIV infection

HIV is most often spread by having vaginal, anal or oral sex with someone who has HIV, without using a condom.

This is because HIV is spread by infected body fluids getting into your bloodstream. This includes blood, semen, vaginal fluids and mucus from inside the anus.

It can also be spread:

- by sharing needles, syringes or other equipment for injecting drugs with someone who has a detectable viral load
- by sharing sex toys with someone who has a detectable viral load
- to your baby during pregnancy or birth if you have a detectable viral load

You cannot get HIV from kissing, hugging or shaking hands, or from sharing toilet seats, food, drinks, or normal everyday household items like cups and cutlery.

HIV test results

If your result is 'negative', this means the test has found no signs of HIV infection.

You may be advised to take another test a few weeks later, especially if you may have been exposed to the HIV virus within the last few weeks.

If your result is 'positive', this means you could have HIV. You'll need to have a blood test at a clinic.

If this second test is also positive, you'll be referred to an HIV clinic for more tests and to discuss your treatment options.

Being diagnosed with HIV

If you've recently been diagnosed with HIV you might be feeling upset, shocked or confused. It can be a difficult time and hard to take in the things you've been told or find the right information.

Here are some key things you need to know:

1. Although there is no cure for HIV, [treatment](#) for it is highly effective and freely available on the NHS. If medication is taken as prescribed, HIV is a manageable condition and shouldn't prevent you from leading a normal life.
2. Once on HIV treatment, the level of virus in your body quickly drops to such a low level that it becomes [undetectable](#), meaning you can't pass it on to others.
3. [Telling others about your HIV](#) isn't something you have to do, but we often want to so that we feel supported by those closest to us.
4. Over 100,000 people in the UK are living with HIV and they come from all walks of life. There are lots of people with lived experience who are willing to share it with you and give you the support you need, including at [My Community](#). You can also join one of our [peer-led support groups](#).
5. If you're living with HIV, [your rights](#) are legally protected. It's also important to know that HIV treatment is free of charge to anyone in the UK, regardless of your immigration status.
6. With the [right care](#), if you are living with HIV you can give birth to healthy babies without passing on HIV. See also our information for [young people growing up with HIV](#).

I just got diagnosed with HIV. What do I need to know?

With HIV treatment you can live a long and healthy life. Treatment is available for free on the NHS regardless of your immigration status.

It's recommended that everyone diagnosed with HIV [starts treatment straight away](#) – regardless of their CD4 count (a measure of the health of your immune system).

This treatment can be as simple as taking one or two pills once a day.

If someone with HIV is taking effective HIV treatment and has [an undetectable viral load](#), they cannot pass on HIV. It can take up to six months on treatment for some people to become undetectable.

Once your treatment is working properly, you may only have to see a doctor once or twice a year.

For more information and support please contact The Terence Higgins Trust on 0808 802 1221 for support, advice and information or email at info@ttht.org.uk.

Or see these websites:

www.nhs.uk/conditions/hiv-and-aids/

Terence Higgins Trust www.ttht.org.uk