

FAST FACTS ABOUT HIV

What is HIV?

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It is the virus that can lead to acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, or AIDS. Unlike some other viruses, the human body cannot get rid of HIV. That means that once you have HIV, you have it for life.

No safe and effective cure currently exists, but scientists are working hard to find one, and remain hopeful. Meanwhile, with proper medical care, HIV can be controlled. Treatment for HIV is often called antiretroviral therapy or ART. It can dramatically prolong the lives of many people infected with HIV and lower their chance of infecting others. Before the introduction of ART in the mid-1990s, people with HIV could progress to AIDS in just a few years. Today, someone diagnosed with HIV and treated before the disease is far advanced can have a nearly normal life expectancy.

HIV affects specific cells of the immune system, called CD4 cells, or T cells. Over time, HIV can destroy so many of these cells that the body can't fight off infections and disease. When this happens, HIV infection leads to AIDS.

What is AIDS?

This is the stage of infection that occurs when your immune system is badly damaged and you become vulnerable to infections and infection-related cancers called opportunistic illnesses. When the number of your CD4 cells falls below 200 cells per cubic millimetre of blood (200 cells/mm³), you are considered to have progressed to AIDS. (Normal CD4 counts are between 500 and 1,600 cells/mm³.) You can also be diagnosed with AIDS if you develop any of more than 20 opportunistic illnesses or HIV-related cancers, regardless of your CD4 count. People with AIDS need medical treatment to prevent death.

What are the symptoms of HIV?

The symptoms of HIV vary depending on the stage of infection. Though people living with HIV tend to be most infectious in the first few months, many are unaware of their status until later stages. The first few weeks after initial infection, individuals may experience no symptoms or an influenza-like illness including fever, headache, rash or sore throat.

As the infection progressively weakens the person's immune system, the individual can develop other signs and symptoms such as swollen lymph nodes, weight loss, fever, diarrhoea and cough. Without treatment, they could also develop severe illnesses such as tuberculosis, cryptococcal meningitis, and cancers such as lymphomas and Kaposi's sarcoma, among others.

How is HIV transmitted?

HIV can be transmitted through unprotected sexual intercourse (vaginal or anal), and oral sex with an infected person; transfusion of contaminated blood; and the sharing of contaminated needles, syringes or other sharp instruments. It may also be transmitted between a mother and her infant during pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding.

How quickly does a person infected with HIV develop AIDS?

The length of time can vary widely between individuals. Left without treatment, the majority of people infected with HIV will develop signs of HIV-related illness within 5–10 years, although this can be shorter. The time between acquiring HIV and an AIDS diagnosis is usually can be 10–15 years, but sometimes longer. Antiretroviral therapy (ART) can slow the disease progression by preventing the virus replicating and therefore decreasing the amount of virus in an infected person's blood (known as the 'viral load').

2014

Source:

World Health Organisation: www.who.int

UNAIDS: www.unaids.org

Centers for Disease Prevention and Control: www.cdc.gov