

HIV and AIDS

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that can result in Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) if left untreated. People who are diagnosed with HIV are said to be HIV positive, even if their infection has not progressed to AIDS. If HIV is left untreated, it may progress to AIDS.

If HIV is left untreated (usually many years), it can affect a person's immune system, leaving the body less able to protect itself from disease. When a person has undiagnosed or untreated HIV the immune system can be damaged and the person can get sick from related infections or cancers.

Treatment:

Medical research has made great progress in reducing the impact of HIV infection on the immune system and managing other illnesses associated with HIV. Currently, while there remains no cure for HIV and AIDS, close adherence to HIV antiretroviral treatment (ART) enables people living with HIV to lead long and healthy lives.

New forms of antiviral treatments keep the virus from multiplying and provide the immune system with relief from HIV infection and allow it to strengthen. There can be some side effects to ART, but they differ from person to person and some newer treatments can cause no side effects at all. It is uncommon to experience serious side effects, but if you do, your doctor can adjust your treatment.

People living with HIV should consult an HIV specialist to ensure they have access to the latest treatment, management of any associated side effects and clinical advice. Adherence to treatment is an essential part of managing HIV and your care team can assist you to ensure you follow your medication regimen correctly.

Starting treatment for HIV as early as possible after diagnosis will improve your long term health prospects. Starting treatment late increases the time the virus has to damage the immune system.

When you start treatment, you'll continue to have regular blood tests to monitor the level of HIV virus in your system. The aim of treatment is to make your HIV undetectable, which will benefit both you and your sexual partners. Research to date has found that people with HIV who take ART daily as prescribed and achieve sustained viral suppression have effectively no risk of sexually transmitting the virus to an HIV-negative partner. Along with other prevention methods like condoms and PrEP, being undetectable can offer effective protection against HIV.

HIV ARTs are subsidised through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) for anybody with a Medicare card.

If you are not eligible for Medicare, you will still be able to access treatment but it is recommended you speak with your treating doctor to discuss your options and get in touch with your local HIV support service.

You can find out more about treatment on the [Queensland Positive People](https://www.qpp.org.au/) (<https://www.qpp.org.au/>) website.

Transmission:

HIV may be transmitted when blood, semen or vaginal fluid from an infected person enters the body of an uninfected person. This can happen through:

- condomless sex – anal or vaginal
- sharing needles and other injecting equipment contaminated with blood
- other blood to blood contact.

HIV positive mothers who are not on effective treatment can transmit the virus to their babies:

- during pregnancy
- during vaginal birth
- when breastfeeding.

HIV can also be transmitted through donated blood and blood products if they are contaminated with HIV. The risk of getting HIV from these products in Australia is extremely low as all blood organs, tissues and semen donated in Australia are screened for HIV.

It is important to know that HIV cannot be transmitted through saliva, sweat, tears, mucous, vomit, urine or faeces. You cannot transmit HIV by kissing, hugging, sharing eating utensils, shaking hands or any other everyday social contact.

Do not have sex if you or your sexual partner has a genital sore/ulcer or a sexually transmissible infection (STI) until it has been managed and treated. Untreated STIs enable HIV to spread more easily from person to person.

Prevention:

In Australia, approximately 10 percent (%) of people living with HIV have not been tested and don't know their HIV status. You cannot make assumptions about someone's HIV status based on the way they look or whether or not they ask to use a condom.

Currently, there is no vaccine to prevent HIV infection. The best way to prevent acquiring HIV and other STIs through sexual contact is to practise safer sex and always using condoms when you have vaginal or anal sex. Using water-based lubricant with condoms is recommended to reduce the risk of condom breakage. Oral sex has a very low to negligible risk for the transmission of HIV, but there is still a risk for the transmission of other STIs.

HIV can also be transmitted through the sharing or reuse of blood contaminated equipment used for injecting drugs. It is important that needles, syringes and other injecting or piercing equipment are never shared between people. Sterile injecting equipment is available through [Needle and Syringe Programs or many local pharmacies](#).

(<https://www.guild.org.au/guild-branches/qld/professional-services/pharmacy-needle-syringe-program>)

Medication to prevent HIV

Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP)

Post exposure prophylaxis (PEP) is a treatment that may prevent HIV infection when taken immediately **after** exposure to HIV, preferably within 2 hours, but it may still be effective if taken within 72 hours (3 days) of exposure. PEP is a combination of anti-HIV drugs that must be taken exactly as prescribed at very specific times for a 4 week period.

It is extremely important that a person who may have been exposed to HIV through contact with blood or body fluids from an HIV positive person seeks medical advice as soon as possible. For more information see related fact sheet - [Post-Exposure Prophylaxis - HIV](#) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/21/188/520/Post-exposure-Prophylaxis--HIV>)

PEP is available free from most public hospitals or from sexual health clinics. Use [this simple locator tool](#) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/hiv-clinic-search>) to find your closest location for PEP access.

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)

Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) for HIV is the use of HIV medication by someone who is HIV negative taken once daily to prevent the virus becoming established in the body. Clinical trials have shown that taking PrEP is very effective in preventing the transmission of HIV. PrEP is now available for Medicare eligible people at medium to high risk of HIV infection through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

Talk to your GP or local sexual health clinic to find out more about PrEP.

Testing

If you have ever had sex, or if you are sexually active, you should get tested for HIV and other STIs. If you have ever injected or currently inject drugs, testing for HIV is also important. It is advisable for you and your partners to have regular sexual health check-ups, especially if one or both of you have more than one sexual partner.

Some people recently exposed to HIV may experience flu-like symptoms, while others will have no symptoms at all. After initial symptoms disappear, HIV may not cause any symptoms for many years. During this time, the virus can be passed on without people knowing. Whilst you may look and feel healthy, the untreated virus could be doing harm to your body.

A specific HIV blood test is needed to detect HIV infection. It can take 6 to 12 weeks after someone has acquired HIV before HIV is able to be detected in the blood through a blood test. This is called the 'window period'.

If you have had condomless anal or vaginal sex or may have been exposed to HIV through sharing needles or other injecting equipment, it is recommended you have an HIV test, but you will need to wait 6 to 12 weeks before a blood test will reliably say you have not acquired HIV. During this time, always practise safe sex with condoms and do not donate blood during this time.

It is important to consider the impact a positive result may have on you or your partner and what support mechanisms you might need. Testing at a health service where support and treatment advice is readily available is the best and recommended testing option.

Screening tests like the HIV point of care tests (also known as 'rapid tests') can be used outside the laboratory by trained professionals and peers with results available in 20 to 30 minutes. A 'reactive' result on this test is not a diagnosis of HIV and the test result needs to be confirmed by a laboratory blood test.

To find out where you can get a rapid HIV test use this [clinic search tool](#) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/hiv-clinic-search>).

If you think you and/or your partner have been at risk of infection, you can have a blood test through your local doctor or sexual health clinic. You have the right to a confidential coded test.

If you find out that you do have HIV, anyone you have practised unsafe anal or vaginal sex with should also be encouraged to have a test. If you feel uncomfortable or embarrassed about telling your current or ex-partners, a member of your health care team can assist by contacting them for you. Your name is not mentioned to ensure it is a confidential process. It is very important for your partner's health and the health of other people with whom they have sex that this contact tracing occur.

For further information about contact tracing use the [Let Them Know](http://www.letthemknow.org.au/) (<http://www.letthemknow.org.au/>) and [Better to Know](http://www.bettertoknow.org.au/) (<http://www.bettertoknow.org.au/>) websites.

Health outcome:

Left untreated over time, HIV destroys the body's immune system. When the damage is severe, people can develop other life-threatening illnesses. At this stage of HIV infection, a person is said to have AIDS.

Other resources:

- [Sexual health information](https://www.qld.gov.au/health/staying-healthy/sexual-health/index.html) (<https://www.qld.gov.au/health/staying-healthy/sexual-health/index.html>)
- [Animations about sexual health](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/animations/default.asp) (<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/animations/default.asp>)
 - [Blood to blood transmission](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/resources/animations#blood) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/resources/animations#blood>)
 - [HIV](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/resources/animations#hiv) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/resources/animations#hiv>)
- [Queensland Positive People \(QPP\)](https://www.qpp.org.au/) (<https://www.qpp.org.au/>)

Related Content

- [Safe Sex](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/116/123/safe-sex) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/116/123/safe-sex>)
- [HIV contact tracing - client responsibilities](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/116/78/hiv-contact-tracing-client-responsibilities) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthCondition/condition/14/116/78/hiv-contact-tracing-client-responsibilities>)
- [Post exposure prophylaxis - HIV](http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthConditions/1/Womens-Health/138/Sexually-Transmitted-Diseases/496/Post-exposure-Prophylaxis--HIV) (<http://conditions.health.qld.gov.au/HealthConditions/1/Womens-Health/138/Sexually-Transmitted-Diseases/496/Post-exposure-Prophylaxis--HIV>)

Help and assistance:

For more information on HIV, you can talk to:

- your local doctor
- your local [sexual health clinic](http://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/default.asp) (<http://www.health.qld.gov.au/clinical-practice/guidelines-procedures/sex-health/services/default.asp>)

You can also contact:

- [Queensland AIDS Council](http://www.qahc.org.au/) (<http://www.qahc.org.au/>)
- [Australian Federation of AIDS Organisations](http://www.afao.org.au/) (<http://www.afao.org.au/>) (AFAO)
- [National Association of People with HIV Australia](http://napwha.org.au/) (<http://napwha.org.au/>) (NAPWHA)
- [Queensland Needle and Syringe Program](https://www.health.qld.gov.au/public-health/topics/atod/queensland-needle-syringe-program) (<https://www.health.qld.gov.au/public-health/topics/atod/queensland-needle-syringe-program>)