

## Is there a cure for HIV?

There is no cure for HIV infection. However, excellent treatment is available.

### What is the treatment for HIV?

Very effective treatment is available for HIV. The treatment involves taking medications called antiretroviral therapy (ART). ART stops the virus from multiplying. It is taken daily for the rest of your life. There are different ART treatment options available, and your treating doctor will discuss this with you and find the best option for you. Most people taking ART find that they tolerate it well and have minimal side effects.

HIV treatment is now provided free in Australia, even if you do not have a Medicare card.

Starting treatment early matters.

When treatment is started early, someone with HIV can live a long and healthy life. The importance of getting treatment early is one of the reasons that regular testing matters so much. The sooner you know you are positive, the sooner you can start treatment.

### What happens if HIV is not treated?

If HIV is untreated, the virus will break down the body's immune system over time. This reduces the body's ability to fight infection and makes certain diseases and cancers more likely. When HIV infection reaches this stage, it becomes AIDS. This can take anywhere from 2 to 20 years but is usually about 10 years. Someone who is HIV positive and untreated will be infectious, putting any sexual partners at risk.

### How can I protect myself from getting HIV?

There are many ways to reduce your risk of getting HIV.

- **Use condoms and dams.** Condoms are a great way to protect yourself from HIV, and other sexually transmissible infections. See SHFPACT's Factsheet on Condoms for more information.

A dental dam is a small sheet of latex that is placed over the genitals or anal area during oral sex to prevent the exchange of body fluids.



- **Get retested regularly.** Have regular sexual health checks if you are having new or casual partners and make sure that any partners have been tested. A regular HIV test is one of the best ways to protect yourself and your partners.
- **PrEP.** PrEP is a medication that can prevent HIV infection and is very effective. You can take it once a day ongoing or 'on demand' when needed. PrEP needs to be prescribed by a doctor. If you are interested in taking PrEP make an appointment with a doctor to discuss it. For more information, see SHFPACT's Factsheet on PrEP and PEP.
- **PEP.** PEP is an antiretroviral treatment that can prevent infection if you have been exposed to HIV. PEP needs to be started as soon as possible and must be started within 72 hours. It is then taken for 28 days. PEP is available through Canberra Sexual Health Centre and hospital emergency departments.
- **Having an undetectable viral load.** If a someone has HIV, takes their HIV medication daily, and their blood tests show no virus (called an undetectable viral load) they cannot transmit HIV. This is called U=U (undetectable = untransmissible)
- **Using safe injecting practices.** If you inject recreational drugs, it is critical not to share any injecting equipment. Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) provide clean injecting equipment and advice on safer practices and safe injecting.

In the ACT Directions provides this service as well as information about the location of other NSPs.  
<https://directionshealth.com/needle-syringe-program/>

- **Only having safe tattooing and piercing.** Tattooing and piercing provided through professional services in Australia must meet strict standards, and there should be no risk of HIV infection. It is essential to use professional services only and avoid having tattoos or piercings in countries that do not have the same safety standards. Backyard tattoos or piercings are not considered safe.

### For more information:

**ACON:** [www.acon.org.au](http://www.acon.org.au)

**Canberra Sexual Health Centre:**

[www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/services-and-clinics/services/canberra-sexual-health-centre-cshc](http://www.canberrahealthservices.act.gov.au/services-and-clinics/services/canberra-sexual-health-centre-cshc)

**Health Direct. HIV Infection and AIDS:**

[www.healthdirect.gov.au/hiv-infection-and-aids](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/hiv-infection-and-aids)

**Meridian:** [www.meridianact.org.au](http://www.meridianact.org.au)

References: ASHM. HIV Management in Australasia. <https://hivmanagement.ashm.org.au/> Australian STI Management Guidelines for use in primary care.

<https://sti.guidelines.org.au/>

Health Direct. HIV Infection and AIDS: [www.healthdirect.gov.au/hiv-infection-and-aids](http://www.healthdirect.gov.au/hiv-infection-and-aids)

SHFPACT is a health promotion charity (HPC) assisted with funding from the ACT Government. All donations to SHFPACT over \$2.00 are tax deductible.





## What is HIV?

HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system and if it untreated it can lead to AIDS. The virus that causes HIV is called a retrovirus.

## What is AIDS?

AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome and is a late stage of untreated HIV. This is where the body's immune system is damaged by the HIV virus making the infected person vulnerable to diseases and infections.

With the HIV treatments that are now available in Australia, AIDS is extremely rare.

## How do you get HIV?

HIV can be found in blood, semen, vaginal secretions, anal secretions, and breast milk.

You can get HIV through:

- Sex without a condom (vaginal or anal) with someone who is HIV positive
- Blood-to-blood contact (sharing drug injecting equipment or through unsterile tattoo and piercing equipment) with a person who is HIV positive
- From parent to child (during pregnancy or breastfeeding) if the parent is HIV positive

It is rare to get HIV when you have sex with condoms and extremely rare to get HIV through oral sex or splashes with blood.

You cannot get HIV through contact with other body fluids such as saliva, urine, or sweat, and you cannot contract HIV through hugging and cuddling, sharing cups, plates, etc.

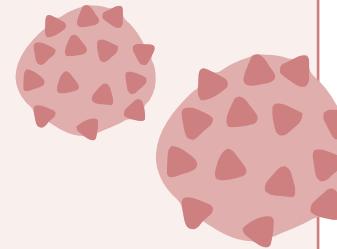
## What are the symptoms of HIV?

Symptoms occur in about 7 out of 10 people and usually occur 2 to 6 weeks after someone is first infected.

This is called a 'seroconversion illness'. Symptoms can include:

- Fever
- Chills
- Night sweats
- Swollen glands
- Sore throat
- Fatigue
- Diarrhoea
- Nausea

After this seroconversion illness, you may not get any symptoms for a long time.



## Can I have a test for HIV?

Yes, you can test for HIV with a blood test, a rapid HIV test, or a self-test in your home.

### • HIV blood test

The HIV blood test is where a small amount of blood is taken and then sent to a pathology lab for testing and is the most common test. It is called an HIV antibody test. An antibody is something your body makes in response to the infection. While the test is mostly accurate by 4 to 6 weeks after a possible exposure to HIV, it can take up to 12 weeks after exposure for your body to make this antibody and the test to be accurate. This is called the 'window period'.

Results of the blood test are usually available within 24 to 48 hours. Some clinics will only notify you early if your test is positive. If your test is negative, you may be advised a little later, usually within a week of your test.

### • Rapid HIV test.

Some centres have rapid HIV testing, where a test is done on the spot with a finger prick or a saliva test. The results are usually available in about 20-30 minutes. The doctor will confirm your result with a blood test.

### • Testing at home.

Self-testing is also available. This is a finger prick test that can be done at home. There is only one self-test that is approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) called the Atomo HIV Self-Test. It is available free online through [hivtest.au](https://hivtest.au). If you use this test at home and get a 'reactive' result you will need to see a doctor to have a blood test to confirm the result.

## What does it mean if my HIV test is negative?

This means that no HIV antibody has been detected. You need to be aware of the window period and if you have had any possible exposure to HIV in the last 12 weeks you will need to repeat the test.

## Can I be sure I am HIV negative?

Yes, the HIV antibody test is accurate. If your HIV test is negative and you have not had any exposure in the 12 weeks before your test you can be sure you do not have HIV.

## What should I do if I have had an exposure, but I am still in the window period?

You can wait until the end of the window period to have your test. Alternatively, you can have a test now then have another HIV test when it has been 12 weeks since your exposure.

If you are concerned that you may have been exposed to HIV it is important not to have any unprotected sex until you can have an accurate test.

## What happens if my HIV test is positive?

If your HIV test is positive, your blood sample will be sent for further testing to confirm the result. Very rarely, a test result is inconclusive and needs further confirmation. If the additional test is negative, then you do not have HIV.

If your further test is positive, then you have HIV.

HIV is a nationally notifiable disease. So, if your test is positive your doctor must notify the Department of Health.

It is critical that any sexual partners are notified so they can be informed and receive testing and counselling. This is called contact tracing. Your doctor will discuss this with you and will help you with this.

You will be referred to a specialist HIV care centre (often a sexual health service). These services are usually free and provide excellent care. You can continue to see your regular GP as well. In the ACT specialist HIV care is provided by Canberra Sexual Health Centre. There are also GPs who provide HIV care.

You will be offered counselling and referral to support services if you would like to access these.

There are good support services available for people living with HIV. In the ACT Meridian provides support for newly diagnosed people, and provides ongoing support, counselling, referral, and peer-led groups. <https://www.meridianact.org.au/aboutus>