FReHA

HIV and AIDS

What is HIV?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is a virus that attacks and destroys cells that help the body fight infections, making a person more susceptible to other infections and diseases.

How is HIV transmitted?

A person can be infected with the virus without knowing that they are infected until much later. This is because the virus can live in a human body for years before the person develops symptoms. Common signs and symptoms of HIV infection include chronic diarrhea, weight loss (without trying) and skin rashes and lesions. The following are some common ways of HIV infection.

- Sex without condoms with an infected person.
- Sharing of needles or injecting equipment with an infected person.
- From an infected mother to her baby during pregnancy, birth and breastfeeding.
- Transfusion of blood or blood products contaminated with HIV.

What are the bodily fluids that carry the virus?

A person can only be infected with HIV by coming into direct contact with certain bodily fluids from a person with HIV. The following are the fluids:

- blood
- semen (cum) and pre-seminal fluid
- vaginal fluids
- rectal fluids
- breast milk

Transmission does not just happen so easily. In order for it to occur, the HIV in these fluids must get into the bloodstream of an HIV-negative person through a mucous membrane, open cuts or sores or by direct injection.

How is HIV NOT transmitted?

Even in this time of age, there are still many myths about HIV transmission. The fact is that HIV does not survive long outside of the human body and it cannot reproduce outside a human host. Hence the term “human” for HIV. The virus does not spread in the air or water, or by casual contact. The following are some of the ways it cannot spread:

- Mosquitoes or insects
- Saliva, tears or sweat
- Activities such as hugging, shaking hands, sharing toilet, sharing dishes or closed-mouth kissing with someone who is HIV-positive.
- Other sexual activities (without exchange of bodily fluids) such as touching.

Who is at risk of HIV Infection?

Everyone and anyone who engage in risk behaviors such as sex without condoms with an HIV-positive partner (with or without knowledge of their HIV status), multiples sex partners and sharing of needles with an HIV-positive person.

How will a person know if they are HIV-positive?

An HIV-positive can only be identified through a HIV Screening. They cannot be distinguished based on physical appearances. There are several types of blood tests such as these:

Antibody screening tests

This test checks for protein that your body makes within 2-8 weeks upon an HIV infection. They are known as ELISA tests and generally very accurate.

Rapid versions of these test can give results in 30 minutes or less. However, there have been occasions where the results were negative despite being infected. This is known as “false negative”.

Nucleic acid test (NAT)

This is also known as an RNA test and can diagnose HIV about 10 days upon exposure. It’s expensive and therefore, usually not the first choice.

Is there a cure for HIV?

HIV is a lifelong disease and there is currently no cure, although many scientists are trying to find one. However, with proper treatment, it has been possible to control HIV and live healthily with the virus for many years.

The treatment for HIV is called antiretroviral therapy (ART) and focuses on taking a combination of HIV medicines every day. It is NOT a cure for HIV but can help people with HIV live longer and healthier.

When should an HIV-positive person start treatment?

It is very important to start treatment early especially during early infection (up to 6 months after HIV infection). Pregnant mothers who are living with the virus must also start taking the meds as soon as possible.

HIV medicines must be taken at the same time every day as prescribed. Non-adherence to the medications may increase the risk of drug resistance. Although some may experience side effects, most are not serious and the benefits often outweigh the risk of side effects. If taken properly, the medication will enable an HIV-positive person to live a healthy life for years.

What happens if an HIV-positive person goes untreated?

If left untreated, HIV can lead to AIDS (Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome). At that point, the immune system is too weak to regulate other diseases and infections. Untreated, life expectancy with AIDS is shorter. With antiretroviral treatment, HIV can be well regulated and life expectancy can be about the same as that of someone who has not contracted HIV.

Is HIV and AIDS the same?

An individual must have contracted HIV in order to develop AIDS. But having HIV doesn't necessarily mean that the person is going to develop AIDS.

How do we prevent HIV transmission?

Practice safe sex

Use condoms correctly and consistently each time you have sex.

Be faithful

Be faithful to your partner.

Do not share injecting needles or syringes.

If injecting drugs. access Harm Reduction (Needle and Syringe Exchange and Methadone Maintenance Therapy) services.

Prevention of mother-to-child transmission

Expectant women who are diagnosed as HIV-positive through antenatal health programmes or government hospitals and clinics will be given the antiretroviral treatment to reduce the risk of HIV infection to their babies.

Get tested!

The only way to know for certain that you have/do not have HIV is by getting tested. Confirmation of HIV status will enable you to seek treatment as soon as possible and help you protect your loved ones from the risk of further transmission of the virus.

What is the meaning of the red ribbon?

The red ribbon is the universal symbol of awareness and support for people living with HIV.

Sources

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