

What is AIDS?

AIDS



Deutsche
AIDS-Hilfe e.V.

AIDS is the term for a disease complex which develops as a result of an acquired disfunction of the body's immune system. The crucial factor causing AIDS is thought to be a virus called HIV. This virus weakens the ability of the body to protect itself against other infections.

After a latency period lasting months and often years an immune deficiency can develop leading to a number of infections and illnesses, for example pneumonia, rare forms of cancer etc. HIV can sometimes cause changes within the central nervous system, but only seldom with serious effects.

HIV infection does not always lead to AIDS.

It is important to note: Many of the symptoms which appear with AIDS are the same ones associated with many other illnesses, for example the flu. Only an experienced doctor is capable of determining whether or not such symptoms are a sign of AIDS.

How is HIV not spread?

HIV is a very vulnerable virus. It dies quickly after exposure to air, and normal home or hospital hygiene measures are sufficient to render it harmless. Although HIV can also be found in urine, excrement, saliva, sweat, and tears, the amounts present there are too low to cause infection in others. To date no cases of HIV infection are known to have taken place through these body fluids.

It follows that there is no danger of infection by shaking hands, hugging, caressing, or kissing, by being coughed or sneezed on, by using the same plates, cups, glasses, or knives and forks, by sharing toilets, swimming pools, or saunas, by working and living with or caring for people with HIV and people with AIDS.

How is HIV transmitted?

Infection is only possible when blood or semen from a person with HIV enters the bloodstream of another person. These body fluids can contain high levels of HIV. Sexual intercourse without a condom is therefore the most frequent path of infection. The lining of the colon is especially susceptible; thus, anal intercourse without a condom is the sexual practice most likely to cause transmission of the virus. HIV can also be transmitted through vaginal intercourse, and there is increased risk of infection during the menstrual cycle if a condom is not used during intercourse. Another risk behavior is intravenous use of drugs if needles are shared among users. In addition, the virus can be transmitted from mother to child during pregnancy and birth.

Danger of infection through blood transfusions and blood products (for example, during treatment for haemophilia) has become virtually impossible in West Germany: since 1985 all donated blood is tested for HIV antibodies.

Is there a treatment?

To date there is no medical cure for acquired immune deficiency, nor is there a vaccine to prevent HIV infection. Nonetheless, medicine has made progress in treatment. It is now possible to successfully treat and control many infections which appear as a result of AIDS.

When is protection advisable?

At present, there is no cure for HIV infection and AIDS, only prevention.

The groups which have been most affected by HIV infection are homosexual and bisexual men and intravenous drug users. Thus, people from these groups can easily find themselves in situations where there is risk of infection.

Men who have sex with other men can best protect themselves through safer sex practices and by using condoms during anal intercourse.

For i.v. drug users, it is paramount to use only one's own needles and syringes, and not share them with other users.

In Europe and North America the number of people with HIV outside of the above mentioned groups is still very small. Although the risk for heterosexuals is low, infection is nonetheless possible through both vaginal and anal intercourse without a condom. In general, on the subjects of sex with more than one partner, sex with persons from the groups most affected, and prostitution, the use of condoms is a good protection against HIV infection, regardless of whether the sexual contact is homosexual or heterosexual.

What does the "test" tell us?

The tests that presently exist are used to determine whether HIV virus is present in the blood. Rather than measuring the presence of the virus itself, such tests indicate the presence of antibodies which the body produces in response to HIV infection. Unlike antibodies produced against other infections, HIV antibodies are not able to render the virus harmless.

If HIV antibodies are shown to be present, the test result is termed "positive"; if no antibodies are found, the result is "negative". After infection with HIV it may take several months, in some cases even years, before antibodies will show up in test results. Thus, a "negative" result of a test given too soon after infection means very little. On the other hand, if a test result is "positive", a follow-up test must be given in order to confirm the results and eliminate mistakes.

A confirmed "positive" test result does not mean that the person tested has or will ever get AIDS. Not all people with HIV develop diseases connected with AIDS.

Important: Proper counseling should be a part of any decision to take an HIV test. If you decide to take the test you should also make sure that your results will not be given to you without qualified counseling.

It is also important that your test be anonymous, without record of your name and address. If you are a citizen of a none-EC-country, this is especially important: a "positive" test result could cause you to be deported. Your local "AIDS-Hilfe" can give you the names and addresses of places where anonymous HIV tests are given.

Independent of whether or not the test is taken, or whether test results are "positive" or "negative", in risk situations protection is advisable.

All serious, potentially fatal illnesses produce fear: fear of bodily decay, dying, death. But there are a number of other fears especially associated with AIDS. HIV is mainly spread in connection with behavior which is not openly discussed in our society and which, although unaccepted by many people, is nonetheless widespread: for example, sex between men, casual sex outside of longstanding relationships, the use of drugs. This fact has made it difficult for both individuals and society as a whole to approach AIDS objectively.

The fact is: HIV infection and AIDS have not spread among the "general population" to the degree once feared. Most cases of AIDS have been among homosexual men and users of drugs. Most of those affected acquired the infection years ago, at a time when only little was known about both paths of infection and methods of protection.

In order to minimize the risk of infection among all sections of the population education is now as important as ever. The success of any education on AIDS depends upon the open recognition of the existence of homosexual behavior, of the fact that people take drugs, and that people pay or take money for sex. Only people who are accepted as they are can be adequately informed. Information on paths of infection and means of protection will not be able to reach people who must fear rejection, punishment, and people who must be afraid of avoidance because of HIV infection.

We must also recognize that there are people with HIV and with AIDS among us: fellow students, workers, neighbours, relatives, and friends. They have a right to education, employment, housing, material security, and proper medical care, as well as to special care by people they trust. The realization of these rights is an important factor in preventing the isolation and the misery of those affected by HIV. If we succeed in reducing unfounded fears of infection and in overcoming prejudices against minorities, our society will not be divided by AIDS.

There are "AIDS-Hilfen" (AIDS assistance organizations) in many cities in West Germany as well as in West Berlin. They offer telephone advice and personal counseling and support.

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