The Facts About HIV and AIDS

How does a person get HIV?

There are three main ways that people become infected:

1. Through unprotected sex with a partner who has HIV
2. By sharing needles with someone who has HIV

3. During pregnancy, childbirth, or breast-feeding—from mother to child

There is no need to worry about exposure to HIV through saliva, urine, feces, or tears. These do not contain high enough concentrations of virus to infect another person. The only four body fluids to transmit HIV are blood, semen, vaginal fluids, and breast milk. You cannot get HIV from an insect bit. Diseases transmitted by insects—like malaria—are caused by parasites living and growing inside the insect's body. HIV doesn't live in bugs—only in people. So it can't be transmitted by mosquitoes or other insects.

What about blood transfusions?

Receiving a transfusion of blood or blood components used to be a significant means of contracting HIV infection.

How can a person avoid HIV?

To be 100 percent safe, a person must never have sex or share needles, for any reason, with an infected person.

People who have sexual intercourse outside a mutually faithful monogamous relationship with an uninfected person must assume that any partner could be infected, and should take steps to reduce their risk of getting HIV. This means using a latex condom correctly, **every** time, and **never** sharing needles—whether the purpose is ear-piercing, tattoos, or injecting legal or illicit drugs. Persons who share needles despite the risk, should clean them with a bleach and water solution before each use.

Remember, you can't tell whether someone is infected by the way he or she looks, or by the person's race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation.

If someone at school has HIV, could my child get it from being in the same building all day?

No. Unlike the viruses that cause flu and colds, HIV does not spread through the air or by skin contact. It is impossible to get HIV simply by being around a person in a classroom or by eating and playing together. No instances of HIV infection or AIDS have ever been attributed to casual social contact between family members or coworkers.

What about getting HIV from a playground accident or bloody nose?

Even if no one in school is known to have HIV, the good hygiene practices known as "universal precautions" should always be followed when cleaning up spills involving body fluids. This protects everyone from AIDS, hepatitis, and many other diseases. All school volunteers and staff—including bus drivers, lunchroom workers, and custodians—should be trained in the universal precautions.

What are universal precautions?

Universal precautions are the basic hygienic practices used to protect anyone who may come in contact with body fluids (blood, urine, feces, and vomit) that could contain disease-causing germs. Universal precautions include proper hand-washing technique, use of disposable gloves, and clean-up procedures. Your children will need to understand different aspects of these precautions depending on their age.

Following are important skills for you to emphasize to your children:

- good hand-washing skills
- immediate notification of an adult, if there is an accident
- never touching blood directly

How does HIV affect the body?

This virus slowly destroys a person's immune system. The immune system normally protects us from illness and infection. Without a healthy immune system, a person becomes vulnerable to diseases he or she normally would not get. Physicians follow specific criteria for determining when a person with HIV has passed into the advanced stage of infection where he or she is diagnosed as having AIDS.

Can you tell if someone has HIV or AIDS by the way that person looks?

No. You cannot tell if someone has AIDS by the way that person talks, walks or looks.

Individuals with HIV can look healthy and feel fine for 10 or more years before developing any sign of infection. They may not even know they have HIV. During those years, however, they can pass the virus to sexual partners and to anyone with whom they share needles.

Furthermore, even negative results on an HIV antibody test do not provide 100 percent assurance that a person is not infected: It takes between six weeks and six months after exposure to the virus to develop detectable amounts of HIV antibodies. During that period, a person may test negative for HIV antibodies but still transmit HIV to others.

There is no test for AIDS itself, only for antibodies to HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

How many people have AIDS?

By December 1996, over 500,000 people in the United States had been diagnosed with AIDS. More than 78,000 were women. Over 7,200 were children under age 13. It is the third leading cause of death for adults ages 25-44 and the fourth leading cause of death for youths ages 15-24.

To date, over 2,500 American teens and more than 95,000 people in their 20s have developed AIDS. A high proportion of these young adults became infected with the virus while teenagers.

In this country alone, over 340,000 adults and children have already died from the disease.

How many people are infected with HIV?

Experts cannot give an exact number. It is estimated that over 1 million people in the United States are living with the virus. As of mid-1994, the World Health Organization believes 17 million adults and children are infected with HIV worldwide.

Can HIV or AIDS be cured?

No. There is no cure for AIDS and no vaccine to prevent HIV infection. We do have drugs to treat many of the infections and illnesses that afflict people with AIDS, and drugs to slow the virus's growth, but none that are known to eliminate all the virus permanently in a person's body. Vaccine research is underway, but a safe and effective one won't be ready for many years, if ever.

Glossary

Abstinence: In the context of HIV and AIDS education, abstinence means refraining from sexual intercourse, drug use, and needle

sharing. The only sure ways to avoid sexual transmission of HIV are 1) abstinence and 2) a lifelong mutually monogamous relationship between two uninfected partners. Most school curricula stress that abstinence holds many benefits for young people and is the only 100 percent effective means of prevention sexually transmitted diseases including HIV.

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome): The most serious and final stage of HIV infection when an individual has one or more opportunistic infections or cancers.

Body fluids: There are many different body fluids. However, only blood, semen, vaginal secretions, and breast milk have been found to contain high enough concentrations of HIV to infect another person. Saliva, sweat, tears, and urine are body fluids, but they do not transmit the virus. No reported cases of AIDS have been caused by contact with any body fluids besides those mentioned above.

Casual contact: Regarding AIDS, this phrase usually refers to non-sexual behaviors like working, eating, playing, studying, hugging, holding hands, etc. These actions do *not* transmit HIV.

HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus): The virus that causes AIDS. HIV slowly destroys a person's immune system until the person can no longer fight off diseases and certain cancers. HIV can be transmitted through semen, vaginal fluids, blood, and breast milk. Outside the body HIIV is easily killed with bleach.

HIV antibody test: A blood test to detect the presence of antibodies to HIV. A person will only test positive for HIV antibodies if he or she has been infected with HIV. Generally, it takes between 6 weeks and 6 months after exposure to the virus to develop detectable amounts of HIV antibodies.

Opportunistic infections: Illnesses caused by organisms that do not cause disease in a person with a healthy immune system. When an individual's immune system becomes weak, such organisms may cause serious, even life-threatening, illnesses.

A word about "Universal Precautions"

You may have heard the term “universal precautions.” Puzzled about what that means? It's simple: Universal precautions are the basic hygienic practices long used to protect anyone who may come in contact with body fluids that could contain disease-causing germs.

They cover hand-washing, use of disposable gloves, clean-up procedures, diapering, and toilet and potty chair procedures. Health-care workers, teachers, day-care workers, school nurses, custodians, bus drivers, lunchroom workers, and classroom volunteers should all be familiar with the procedures.

They are called universal because they afford protection against many disease-causing germs, not only HIV. Follow them every time there is an accident or injury, not just when it involves someone known to have HIV. By doing so, you won't need to worry about the HIV status of a particular child or adult.

It is important for every school to teach staff and volunteers the universal precautions and to insist they be followed. Staff should know where basic cleaning supplies are stored and have easy access to them. It is the school's responsibility to keep adequate supplies on hand at all times. PTA should make sure the school provides supplies and regular training for staff and volunteers. If you are not sure whether a school follows the universal precautions, ask the principal.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) produces a video tape on universal precautions in school settings. To order the video write to AFT's Public Affairs Department at 555 New Jersey Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20001. The National Education Association publication *Responding to HIV and AIDS* has a section on this topic. For a copy, call (202) 822-7570. Also see *Someone at School Has AIDS*, published by the National Association of State Boards of Education. Call (703) 684-4000 for a copy.