

HIV and how to protect yourself from it

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HIV is a virus that destroys the human immunology system. The final stage of HIV infection is AIDS, acquired immune deficiency syndrome, which an infectee develops on average 10 years after the initial infection.

One in three infectees exhibits initial symptoms 1 - 8 weeks after the infection. The symptoms include fever, soreness of the throat, headache, joint aches, rash and swelling of the lymph nodes. The initial symptoms disappear within a few weeks. After the initial symptoms or a symptom-free initial period the virus continues to spread in the system. The infectee may still feel perfectly healthy. The symptom-free stage usually lasts for several years. As the disease progresses, enlarged lymph nodes appear on the neck, the clavical area and in the armpits. The general condition of the patient deteriorates and fever and night sweats are common. When the disease reaches AIDS stage, the immunity of the patient decreases and they are subject to various inflammatory diseases and tumours. The condition of the patient depends on what types of illnesses are developed and how they can be treated.

HIV infection is usually diagnosed by a blood test. Because the test is based on the presence of antibodies, the infection cannot be diagnosed right after the infection. A negative test result is reliable only six months after the infection risk situation.

The medical treatment of HIV has developed rapidly. Even though there is no medication that would cure the infection, the present combination medication considerably improves the quality of life of those infected and lengthens their life expectancy. HIV medications are effective only if they are used precisely and continuously according to directions. The use of drugs makes it in practice impossible to follow the exact directions.

If you have been diagnosed with an HIV infection, it is very important that you attend the scheduled check-ups, take care of your general condition and seek medical care immediately if you contract an inflammatory disease. Avoid everything that might weaken your immune system.

How it is contracted

HIV can be contracted through blood, semen or vaginal fluids. The most common risk situations are unprotected sex and the use of intravenous drugs. HIV can be contracted from shared needles, syringes and other paraphernalia relating to the preparation and injection of drugs. You can also contract it from razor blades, toothbrushes and tattooing equipment if there is blood on them. The mother may infect her child during pregnancy, birth or nursing. The risk of spreading the virus is greatest in the initial stages of the infection and in the AIDS stage.

You cannot contract HIV in daily interaction, from shaking hands, using the toilet, in the sauna or from insects.

How to protect yourself

Use a condom during the entire sexual intercourse. If you use intravenous drugs, use only your own, clean needles, syringes, filter and other equipment. Do not make a blood oath. If you decide to have tattoos, make sure they are done using sterile equipment.

Also remember the other sexually transmitted diseases

If you have an untreated sexually transmitted disease, such as chlamydia, gonorrhoea or syphilis, your risk of contracting HIV is increased. Sexually transmitted diseases do not go away without treatment. They are treated with antibiotics. If you think you may have a sexually transmitted disease, contact the local polyclinic for venereal diseases or the health centre. Many sexually transmitted diseases may be entirely symptom-free for years but you may still spread them. If left untreated, sexually transmitted diseases may also have serious consequences, like infertility, joint problems, and symptoms of the nervous system, like dementia. An early diagnosis and treatment diminishes the chances of such consequences. If you have an untreated sexually transmitted disease, you may also spread it to other people.

You cannot see if a person has a sexually transmitted diseases just by looking at them. Every unprotected sexual intercourse poses a risk of infection. The only way to protect yourself from sexually transmitted diseases is to use a

condom during the entire intercourse. If you have had unprotected sex or the condom breaks or slips off, you should get yourself tested even if you don't have any symptoms. The diseases cannot be diagnosed immediately after the possible infection, so wait for about 10 days before getting yourself tested. You can be tested and treated at polyclinics for venereal diseases, local health centres and private clinics.

For more information contact following places:

- [The Finnish Aids Council](#) , tel. 0207 465700, Mo-Fri 10-15:30
- The national AIDS phone line of the Red Cross 0203 - 27000 Mon - Thu 17 - 20, see also [their website](#) (in Finnish)
- Health centres (see your local phone book for contact information)
- Polyclinics for venereal diseases (see your local phone book for contact information)
- [A-Clinics](#)

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