



Your **2019** guide to

What is HIV and AIDS

What is HIV and AIDS and **how does it impact your life?**



HIV is the human immunodeficiency virus. It can lead to acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS).

Immunodeficiency means that the immune system, which is the body's main method for fighting infections has been placed at risk. It is important to remember that any defect in the immune system decreases a person's ability to fight infections. For example, an immune-deficient individual will get more frequent infections and heal more slowly.

After being infected by the virus the immune system begins to progressively fail, leading to life-threatening opportunistic infections and tumours. This stage of the HIV infection is known as AIDS. Unless treated, all HIV-infected individuals develop AIDS and might die from opportunistic infections associated with the progressive failure of the immune system.

HIV transmission

To become infected by HIV, you need to come into contact with body fluids containing the virus. The virus is present in blood, genital secretions (sperm and vaginal secretions) and also in the breast milk of breastfeeding mothers infected with HIV.

How HIV is transmitted:

- Unprotected sexual intercourse with an HIV-infected partner.
- Contact with infected blood; for example sharing contaminated needles, using a razor blade from an infected person and also from skin piercing procedures (e.g. tattooing) if the tools used are commonly shared.
- From mother to child during pregnancy, during the delivery of the baby and thereafter through breastfeeding.

How does HIV damage the body?

The role of the immune system is to defend our body from germs. A CD4 cell is a type of white blood cell, which is a key element of the immune system. CD4 cells are like soldiers in that they protect your body from germs and help us to deal with most infections. In a healthy person the normal CD4 cell count is between 500 and 1500 cells in each millilitre of blood. The CD4 count is usually reported as per cubic millimetre (mm³).

When a CD4 cell is infected with HIV it is transformed into a virus factory. The infected CD4 produces new HIV viruses. All new viruses are then released into the bloodstream where they look for other CD4 cells to infect.

When a CD4 cell has been used for a while, it is destroyed; more CD4 cells are destroyed after being infected with HIV. This is when the immune system loses the battle and eventually breaks down. If the CD4 count goes below 350 CD4 cells/mm³ the body does not have enough defences to fight germs. The AIDS stage is when the CD4 is below 200.

The doctor will do a viral load test along with a CD4 count to get a more accurate picture of the disease stage and monitor the disease. Viral load testing looks for the number of virus particles (called copies) in a millilitre of blood. If the viral load is low or undetectable it means that the disease is not far advanced, or that the antiretroviral treatment (ART) is working.

Please remember that it is impossible to contract the virus through kissing, shaking hands, hugging, sharing the same seat or bed, using the same shower or toilets, or sharing plates or glasses. HIV can still be transmitted by patients who are being treated with antiretrovirals.

How do I know if I am infected with HIV?

In the early stages of infection, there are no visible symptoms and the infection can be diagnosed **ONLY** by testing a person's blood

At present, there are three tests available which can diagnose HIV infection:

Antibody tests

These tests look for the presence of antibodies (proteins) produced by the body in response to HIV infection. The first test is a blood test called ELISA. If antibodies are present, the test gives a positive result. A positive test has to be confirmed by a second test performed on a new blood sample.

Rapid tests

All that is needed is a finger-prick blood test, which will give results within 10 to 20 minutes depending on the test. The HIV antibodies generally do not reach detectable levels in the blood until about three months after infection. The period between the time of infection and the time that the blood is tested positive for antibodies is called the window period.

PCR (Polymerase Chain Reaction) test

The PCR looks for HIV itself in the blood. This test can detect the virus within a few days after infection.

Pre- and Post-test counselling

There is still considerable stigma and discrimination attached to HIV/AIDS and you should be aware of the emotional trauma and the possible consequences a positive test could bring about. For these reasons, pre-test counselling is crucial. With the help of a counsellor, the person taking the test can adequately prepare for the possible consequences. This is, however, outweighed by the many advantages of knowing your HIV status.

If the test turns out to be positive:

- You can have early access to treatment.
- You can take better care of your health.
- You can plan your future better.
- You can prevent your partner from contracting HIV.

The counsellor could help you win back your confidence while sharing valuable advice on how to live a healthy, productive and responsible life. You will also be better prepared to deal with your relatives, friends, colleagues, classmates and other important individuals who are part of your life. If the test is negative you will be advised on the appropriate preventive methods to remain negative.

Preventing HIV infection

Sexual transmission accounts for the majority of infections.

HIV transmission can be reduced as follows:

- Abstinence and delaying the onset of sexual activity.
- Being faithful to one partner.
- Using condoms.
- Screening for and treating sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) as they enhance the risk of HIV transmission through genital ulcers or infections.
- Having an HIV test after engaging in risky behaviour.
- Circumcision.

It is also important to:

- address drug and alcohol abuse as they are also linked to HIV transmission;
- promote sexual education;
- promote voluntary counselling and testing

Symptoms of HIV

Many people do not develop any symptoms when they first become infected with HIV. Some people, however, get a flu-like illness within three to six weeks after exposure to the virus. This illness may include: fever, headaches, tiredness, nausea, diarrhoea and enlarged lymph nodes in the neck, armpits and groin.

During this period, the quantity of the virus in the body is high and the disease may spread to different organs, particularly the lymphoid tissue. At this stage, the infected person is more likely to pass on the infection to others.

Some people may present with symptoms as soon as a few months, while others may be symptom-free for five to seven years or longer. However, during the time that you have no symptoms the virus will be actively multiplying, infecting and killing cells of the immune system.

Symptoms of AIDS

When the body's immune system finds it difficult to fight against the HIV virus, the person becomes more prone to serious infections and symptoms, this means you have AIDS. Early signs and symptoms of AIDS are: Swelling of the lymph nodes in the neck, behind the ears, under the arms and in the groin, thrush, painful skin rashes, sores on the lips that does not heal. The person becomes more susceptible to opportunistic infections, because they swarm the body using the opportunity of its low immunity. Opportunistic infections are caused by weak bacteria, viruses, fungi and parasites that are normally controlled by the immune system. Opportunistic infections include TB, Cryptococcal, meningitis, pneumonia and cancers.

How do you get TB?

TB is one of the most common opportunistic infections that a person living with HIV can contract. TB is spread from one person to another through the air and breathing in this contaminated air.

TB usually affects the lungs, but can also be found in other parts of the body. It is important to start TB treatment as soon as possible; without treatment TB can spread to other parts of the body through the bloodstream.

Symptoms of TB

- Coughing sometimes with mucus or blood
- Chills
- Fatigue
- Fever
- Weight loss
- Loss of appetite
- Night sweats

If you suspect you have any of the above symptoms please consult with your Doctor.

TREATMENT

There is as yet no cure for HIV infection. While current medications can dramatically improve the health of people living with HIV and slow progression from HIV infection to AIDS, existing treatments need to be taken daily for the rest of a person's life. Treatment with antiretrovirals (ARVs) increases the life expectancy of people infected with HIV. ARVs stop the virus from multiplying and allow the body to restore itself. Every HIV-infected person should have a CD4 count test done.

All HIV positive children and adults regardless of CD4 count will be offered ART. Willingness and readiness to start ART will be assessed prior to initiation of treatment with ARVs. Started early enough, ART will even prevent HIV infection from progressing to the AIDS stage.

Taking your ARVs correctly

For ARVs to work properly, it is very important to take them correctly. You must remember to take the dose of your ARVs every day. If you miss doses of your ARVs, the HIV will become resistant to the medication. Once the HIV become resistant to the medication, the medication will no longer work on the virus and treatment will have to change. This will lead to a more complex regimen and increase in pill burden.

Changing of ARV medication

In some instances it may be necessary to make changes in your ARV medication. You may experience side effects to certain medication; if you feel unwell consult your Doctor. Some of the side effects disappear within a few weeks after starting treatment and the doctor may encourage you to continue with treatment, if the side effects are severe the doctor may change your treatment.

Cost effective generic medication

Generic medication is identical to original medication; it works exactly the same, has the exact same dosage, has equal strength, is used in the same way, has the same active ingredient and complies with the same standards of quality, safety and efficacy. Generic medications are often cheaper than the original medication. If you have any questions regarding cost effect generic medication, your pharmacist will be able to assist.

LIFE AFTER HIV

HIV is not the "end of the world". For most people living with HIV, HIV is easy to treat and easy to manage. ART can give you a normal life expectancy and an excellent quality of life. A positive attitude can go a long way towards improving your wellbeing and general quality of life.

How to enrol on the GEMS HIV/AIDS Disease Management Programme (HIV/AIDS DMP)

Please call **0860 436 736** or use our “please call me number” **083 843 67 64** from Monday to Friday between 8am and 5pm and Saturday from 8am to 12pm or email us at **hiv@gems.gov.za** for further information on the programme, to ask for an application form to enrol or for contact details of treating doctors in your area.

Visit your treating doctor who must examine you and complete your application form. You will need to sign the application form and your doctor should submit it to GEMS by fax to the confidential toll-free fax number **0800 436 732** or email to **hiv@gems.gov.za**.

As soon as your application has been received and approved, you will be notified via your preferred method of communication (such as SMS, post or email). You will then be able to access your medical care benefits where appropriate.

How do I send a “please call me”?

When using the Vodacom network:

- Enter the following digits into your cell phone
*140*0838436764#
- Your “please call me” message has now been sent and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.

When using the MTN network:

- Enter the following digits into your cell phone
*121*0838436764#
- Your “please call me” message has now been sent and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.

When using the Cell C network:

- Enter the following digits into your cell phone
*111*0838436764#
- Your “please call me” message has now been sent and a treatment counsellor will contact you within 24 hours.





Contact details

GEMS HIV/AIDS Disease Management Programme

Call: 0860 436 736

Please call me: 083 843 67 64

Email: hiv@gems.gov.za

For other Chronic conditions

Call: 0860 00 4367

Email: chronicdsp@gems.gov.za

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