



Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago
National AIDS Coordinating Committee

FAQs

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HIV AND AIDS

#EndAIDSby2030TT



@NACC.TT



@OPM_GCA_NACC



National AIDS Coordinating Committee

What is HIV and What is AIDS ?

Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) is the virus that causes Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). HIV damages the immune system, making the body less able to protect itself from illness. Eventually this results in AIDS, where illnesses become so serious they are life threatening. Although there is no vaccine or cure, effective treatment can delay serious illness and improve quality of life.

How is HIV Transmitted?

HIV is found in blood, semen, vaginal fluids and breast milk. You can contract HIV by getting blood or body fluids from an infected person into your bloodstream. This can happen through:

- ⌘ Unprotected sexual intercourse (anal or vaginal) with an infected person,
- ⌘ Transfusions of unscreened and untested blood,
- ⌘ Contaminated needles (most frequently for injecting drug use), and
- ⌘ From an infected mother to her child during pregnancy, childbirth or breastfeeding.

Can I contract HIV through normal social contact or activities such as shaking hands, using the same toilet seat, sharing cutlery or exposure to sneezes and coughs?

No. HIV is not an air-borne, water-borne or food-borne virus; therefore ordinary social contact such as those described above does not result in the virus being passed from one person to another. Therefore HIV is not transmitted by hugging someone with HIV, using and sharing utensils, saliva, sweat, urine, mosquito bites, toilet seats, air, water, food, drinks.

- ⌘ **Limit the number of sex partners.** HIV is transmitted through sex and having several sex partners can place one at risk for HIV infection. Limiting the number of sex partners and knowing your partners status and remaining faithful to one uninfected partner can reduce the risk of HIV.
- ⌘ **Consider PEP.** Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) is an HIV prevention strategy that can be used in emergency situations e.g. accidental occupational exposure through needle sticks, or sexual assault by someone of unknown HIV status. PEP must be administered within 72 hours of potential infection and must be taken for 28 days.

How long can HIV survive outside of the human body?

HIV is a very fragile virus and cannot survive outside of the body for any substantial length of time. Many common substances such as hot liquid, soap, bleach, alcohol and the gastric juices in the stomach can destroy the virus.

If you or someone you know has HIV what should you do?

Get linked to treatment and support immediately. There are seven (7) treatment sites across Trinidad and Tobago which offer free treatment for HIV. There are also several NGOs which provide psychosocial support in their networks.

If you have not been tested and are sexually active you should get tested for HIV and other Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs)



How can you take care of and protect yourself against HIV Infection?

- ⌘ **Abstain or use a latex condom and lubes.** Use water-based or silicone-based lubricant – particularly for anal or vaginal sex – to prevent tears in the skin and to keep condoms from breaking
- ⌘ **Get tested.** If you are at risk of getting HIV, consider having an HIV test. It's the only way to know if you or a partner has HIV
- ⌘ **Be careful with tattoos.** If you are getting body piercing or tattoos, ensure the provider's equipment is sterilized according to Ministry of Health guidelines.
- ⌘ **Test and Treat STIs.** Having an active STI, or even a history of certain STIs, can make it easier to acquire or transmit HIV.
- ⌘ **Talk to Your Partners.** Ask sexual partners about the last time they got tested for HIV and other STIs. Consider getting tested together.
- ⌘ **Date Undetectable.** By consistently taking their medication, people living with HIV are able to lower the amount of HIV in their bodies to undetectable levels. While undetectable, a person living with HIV remains in good health, and it is virtually impossible for them to transmit the virus to a partner. Prevention options (e.g. condoms) exist for those in relationships where one partner is not yet undetectable.
- ⌘ **Be mindful of drug and alcohol use.** Substance use can increase your chances of acquiring HIV directly and indirectly, depending on the circumstances.

What are the Symptoms of HIV and AIDS?

Many people with HIV look and feel healthy, but more than half will develop a range of symptoms as the body's immune system reacts to the virus. These may last for a few days to a few weeks and may include flu-like symptoms, mouth ulcers, swollen glands, recurrent fever, night sweats and chills, diarrhea or persistent or dry cough.

Note: These symptoms can also be caused by conditions other than HIV. Only a test can confirm that HIV is the cause.

After infection, many people can remain well with no symptoms for many years. However, even if someone infected with HIV has no symptoms, they can still spread the disease. Infection with HIV does not mean a person has AIDS. A diagnosis of AIDS is made only when the immune system breaks down, leading to infections and cancers.

How long does it take for HIV to cause AIDS?

Currently, the average time between HIV infection and the appearance of signs that could lead to an AIDS diagnosis is 8-11 years. This time varies greatly from person to person and can depend on many factors including a person's health status and behaviors. Today there are medical treatments that can slow down the rate at which HIV weakens the immune system. There are other treatments that can prevent or cure some of the illnesses associated with AIDS. As with other diseases, early detection offers more options for treatment and preventative health care.



What is an HIV Test?

People with HIV develop antibodies (germ fighting proteins) to the virus. It can take up to three months after infection with HIV before these antibodies can be detected. Labs look for these antibodies using saliva, urine or a small blood sample to determine if a person has been infected with HIV, not for HIV itself. If the first screening test (ELIZA) is positive, a second test is done to confirm the result. When both tests prove positive, it means that the antibody to HIV has been found.

Early testing and diagnosis for HIV can be very helpful because, when people know their HIV status, they can act to take care of themselves and to avoid passing on the virus to others. If the result is positive, they can get the care and support they need for living with HIV.

It is important that people undertake pre and post tests voluntary counseling to help them cope with the news, to seek the treatment they need and to plan for the future.

What is the “window period”? – When will HIV be detectable in the blood?

After exposure to HIV, it can take 3 to 12 weeks (21-84 days) for an infected person's body to make enough antibodies for a screening test to detect them. This is called the window period. IgM is typically released around 3 weeks after infection which is one of the antibodies the test is designed to detect. An individual may test positive with an HIV Test in as little as 21-22 days after infection, however it can take as long as 3 months to produce a positive result. Approximately 97% of people will develop detectable antibodies during this window period. A negative result may not be accurate until 3 months after the infection. If someone has been exposed to HIV and obtains a negative test result during the window period, they should re-test 3 months after possible exposure to HIV.

When should someone be tested for HIV?

HIV may not show up on an HIV test immediately so testing is recommended usually every three to six months. The frequency of taking the test also depends on how many sexual partners you have and other risk factors.

Is there a cure for HIV and AIDS?

Although there have been many advances in HIV treatments and therapies in recent years that have dramatically improved the quality of life and life expectancy of persons with HIV and AIDS in many countries, there is, as of yet, no cure.

Are there Treatments for HIV and AIDS?

Yes there are treatments called Antiretroviral Drugs which are used to treat HIV. Treatments for HIV and AIDS include medicines to:

- ⌘ Reduce the amount of virus in the body (antiretroviral)
- ⌘ Prevent the serious illnesses of AIDS (prophylactic and preventative drugs)
- ⌘ Treat infections and diseases that occur as part of the AIDS syndrome.

Medicines need to be taken regularly and frequently as missed doses can give the virus a chance to grow and lead to drug resistance. Taking drug treatments for HIV and AIDS can be very complicated and have a substantial impact on lifestyle and relationships. Support from relatives, friends, caregivers, counselors, other persons living with HIV and AIDS and health care professionals is essential.

Taking medicines consistently can result in the diagnosed person living a normal, productive, healthy lifestyle.

